



An exterior rendering of the New Jersey Arts Incubator, a performing arts development organization that will anchor an arts-centered revitalization project in the Valley section of West Orange.

Arts development to revamp Valley

W.O. Zoning Board approves plans for 12,000 square foot Incubator building

By Laura Moss
Managing Editor

Artistic revivals have begun in stranger places.

Jazz music traces its roots to 1835 in New Orleans, where slaves congregated in a public square each Sunday to play music and dance.

Punk rock, an anti-establishment musical genre, began in basements and garages across America in the mid-1970s.

So while some may see the Valley section of West Orange as an odd spot for a large-scale neighborhood revitalization project grounded in art, theater and music, Patrick Morrissey doesn't see it that way.

"In the beginning, our focus was to deal comprehensively with the Valley and find solutions to all of its challenges," said Morrissey, the executive director of Housing and Neighborhood Development Services, Inc., a non-profit redevelopment corporation that is leading a movement to transform the Valley into a thriving arts district. "People said they wanted more recreation opportunities for young people. They wanted to attract new businesses. They wanted to rebuild the tax base, beautify the neighborhood and create careers for young people. As we began to work on those solutions, we realized why wouldn't the

arts, if we did it right, meet all those needs?"

So HANDS set the pieces of motion, and over time, the corporation and its private sector partners earned designation as the redevelopers for six blocks in the Valley, as well as a few individual sites in close proximity to those blocks such as the buildings that formerly housed Coquelle's Bakery and Ricci's In The Valley Restaurant.

The preliminary plans for one of the first steps in the project — the New Jersey Arts Incubator, founded by West Orange residents Amy Simon and Joe Gardner — were reviewed by the West Orange Zoning Board at its Sept. 17 meeting and unanimously approved. The NJAI will occupy the majority of the HANDS-owned, 12,000 square foot space at 555 Valley Road and feature a 99-seat theater with a stage and dressing facilities, three rehearsal studios, a multi-media television and radio production studio, three offices, a lobby and a box office.

According to Simon, the NJAI is a performing arts development organization whose mission is to bring sustainable economic development to the area through the arts and to create educational opportunities and jobs for low- and moderate-income residents, as well as for performing artists from across the state. It will also provide creative resources and a destination location to the Valley corridor.

Its mission is expansive: "to create an environment where artists, developing artists and aspiring artists of all socioeconomic and cultural origins from New Jersey may explore, create and communicate their craft in a supportive and nurturing environment; to present works of artistic expression by local, regional and visiting artists in an effort to foster the communications of ideas and perspectives within our multi-cultural and diverse socio-economic communities; and to explore the partnership between art, education and communication with professionals in the performing arts sharing their knowledge with students of all ages with a special emphasis on programming for children of diverse cultures in low socio-economic backgrounds."

According to Simon, a well renowned regional professional theater company will serve as the anchor theater tenant.

Architectural details for the space will be ironed out on Oct. 1 when the artistic advisory board of the Arts Incubator — consisting of artists, actors, producers, musicians, film and radio professionals from across New Jersey — meet in the building with John Winkelmann, the project architect, to discuss the specific elements desired for the interior construction of a performing arts facility.

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Arts Incubator is first step in Valley revitalization plan

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"As actors, as residents of West Orange and as activists in the Valley community, the advent of the New Jersey Arts Incubator facility is the culmination of much effort and much dreaming," Simon said. "I really look forward to creating a positive change in the Valley by sharing this dream with my community."

A new West Orange Police substation will also be located in the NJAI building, a community center designed not only to increase police presence in the area but create an atmosphere where township officers can intermingle with neighborhood youth.

The substation was originally planned for 549 Valley Road, an ex-gas station down the road from what will become the Incubator building, but the site required an extensive environmental remediation. The township will still use its option to purchase 549 Valley Road but allow HANDS to develop the property, most likely into a small gallery space. In exchange, HANDS will allow the township to establish the police substation in the Incubator building.

The township will still pay the \$425,000 needed for the environmental remediation, but most will be covered by a state environmental grant.

'The NJAI ... will truly change the landscape of the Valley ... and will create an economic engine that will support the region through the next decades.'

— Amy Simon

"West Orange, as a municipality, is eligible for this state grant, but the property owner would not be," Morrissey said. "West Orange will put the substation in our building and they'll deal with the gas station and when they're done they'll transfer it us."

Finally, other space in the Incubator building will house a major coffee retailer and a theater-related business.

"The New Jersey Arts Incubator and the new police substation will truly change the landscape of the Valley, bringing with it a cultural center, an exciting and comfortable destination, and in partnership with Valley Arts and HANDS, Inc. will create an economic engine that will support the region through the next decades," Simon said.

The NJAI goes above and beyond the type of development Morrissey and other HANDS representatives envisioned when they set out to create a Valley renaissance more than six years ago.

"Our idea was to create 100 arts spaces of different kinds, but it wasn't until we looked at the Incubator building that we realized we had an opportunity for a small theater, too," Morrissey said.

As plans for the Incubator move forward, HANDS is also pursuing a number of other development projects in the Valley sections of both West Orange and Orange in conjunction with the arts district revitalization plan.

"We plan to develop 400-500 housing units, with 100 in West Orange, and 100 arts spaces to anchor the arts district," Morrissey said.

Construction at the Coquelle's, Ricci's and Incubator sites will be completed within 12 months and construction of the artists' lofts, workshops and retail space at Freeman and Jefferson streets will begin in approximately eight months, he added.

Laura Moss can be reached at 973-763-0700, ext. 109, or at wchronicle@thelocalsource.com.