

## Highland School Redevelopment: A Neighborhood Success Story

Through the combined efforts of the Poncey-Highland neighborhood, the Atlanta Board of Education and developer Blair Schlossberg of Streetside Developers, an historic elementary school has been preserved and turned into a successful loft project. The neighborhood is very pleased with the results of the Highland School lofts project, and the developer is thrilled that half of the 30 units are sold.

This historic two-story red brick elementary school was designed by prominent Atlanta architect Edward F. Dougherty, and completed in 1911. Dougherty, an Atlanta native, attended the University of Georgia, Cornell University and the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. When he returned to Atlanta, he opened an architecture office in the Candler Building in 1907. In addition to the Highland School, Dougherty designed the First Church of Christ, Scientist in Ansley Park; Druid Hills Golf Club; Druid Hills Baptist Church; Imperial Hotel and numerous houses.

When the Highland School became overcrowded in the 1920s, an auditorium was added on the west side. Another wing was added in 1937 that included four classrooms and two bathrooms.

The school was operational until 1972 when it was closed. The building was then used as offices until the late 1990s when the school board decided to sell it.

According to Lee Echols, chairman of the Highland School Task Force of the Poncey-Highlands Neighborhood Association, the key to a successful project is getting an early start. The Poncey-Highland Neighborhood Association (PHNA) held an initial meeting with the Atlanta Public Schools director of facilities in the fall of 2000. They discussed procedural steps, school contacts and timetable, and how the Highland School ranked in terms of priorities. Following the first meeting, the PHNA formed its Highland School Task Force and assigned tracking responsibilities to task force members.

A major concern at that time was the interior condition of the school, which was an active haven for vagrants and illicit activities. The task force worked closely with several Atlanta Board of Education members to improve security and limit access at the school, while at the same time lobbying them on Poncey-Highland's position on the school's future.

To clearly spell out the neighborhood's wishes, the task force crafted a position statement for the Highland School, and adopted the statement at both the PHNA and NPU levels. The task force then submitted the position document to the Atlanta Public Schools, requesting that it be included in the pending Request for Proposal for the Highland School. It was included, making the neighborhood's negotiating stance with the RFP respondents much stronger.

When the responses to the Highland School RFP were submitted, the PHNA organized three days of presentations by interested developers or buyers. Each presentation was ranked by the PHNA task force on the five key criteria supported by the neighborhood -- the most important of which was that "No additional structures will be built on the school property.... Only the existing school building will be renovated." Presenters who did not meet this key goal were eliminated from consideration.

The PHNA then submitted to the Atlanta Public Schools the five proposals that fit its criteria. Much to its great surprise and pleasure, the Atlanta Board of Education selected its top choice as the winning proposal.

Echols, chairman of the Highland School Task Force, gives everyone high marks. "The developer is doing everything he said he would, and the work is good," said Echols. "The façade has been repaired beautifully."

He also complimented the Atlanta Board of Education, the owner of the school building. "We had surprising cooperation from the Board of Education."

*Lee Echols and Bamby Ray contributed to this article.*