

Keeping house

THE COMMUNITY
COST OF
PRESERVING
A COMMUNITY
INSTITUTION
BY BEN WECHT



Pamela Robinson listens to state Rep. Jake Wheatley during an October meeting about the status of the Hill House Association.

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By all accounts, the mood inside the Hill House Association's Blakey Program Center on Aug. 28 was a tense one. As a standing-room-only crowd of some 200 community members listened, the organization's leaders informed the group of their imminent plans to sell four of the Hill House's seven buildings, including the program facility where they were convened and the headquarters just around the corner on Centre Avenue. The reason: "dire financial problems."

The financial news was not necessarily surprising given the Hill House's budgetary struggles of the past several years. But the idea that the organization serving the Hill District's diverse human services needs for more than half a century would sell its most visible assets to a private developer certainly was. The deal with pending buyer Pittsburgh-based Omicelo LLC is expected to bring a cash infusion of some \$4 million to \$6 million and reduce the organization's deficit to about \$2 million with no anticipated interruption of its current services. Still, it was a testament to just how near and dear the Hill House is to the hearts of the community that emotions were running high that evening.

"I'm passionate about this place," Terri Baltimore, the Hill House's director of neighborhood engagement, said about both the headquarters campus and the organization. A staff member for more than a quarter-century, she uses such phrases as "unexpected amazingness" to describe the organization. Referring to the Hill House's spiritual roots in the Irene Kaufmann Settlement House, she added, "It's not just a building, but everything that's happened in this space for over 100 years and contributed to the quality of life in this neighborhood."

The Hill House Association was born, in a sense, from the ashes of the construction of the Civic Arena, an entertainment and sports venue that once

occupied a section of what is known as the Lower Hill. The arena was part of an "urban renewal" project in the late 1950s and early 1960s that displaced an estimated 8,000 residents and some 400 businesses. The Hill House was established, in part, to respond to the community upheaval with needed human and social services. Since 1964, through times of riot and renaissance, the organization has tended to the Hill's predominantly African American population in a myriad of ways. With its main programs focusing on arts and culture, senior services and community engagement, the Hill House also acts as home base to more than two dozen "campus partners." These include organizations as diverse as AJAPO, which resettles refugees and immigrants, to a medical clinic providing key primary and behavioral health services, to the Hill District Consensus Group, which helped to negotiate neighborhood benefits from redevelopment of the Civic Arena site and construction of the PPG Paints Arena, completed in 2010.

But as its client base has grown and diversified, so too has the Hill House itself, straining both its mission and its resources. A painful round of layoffs several years ago and recent streamlining of programs helped to a degree, as has support over the past decade from local philanthropies including the Endowments and the Pittsburgh, Richard King Mellon, Hillman, McCune, Eden Hall and McAuley Ministries foundations. But with a real estate portfolio that includes the historic Kaufmann Center, a Dollar Bank, and the Centre-Heldman Plaza, a strip mall anchored by a Shop 'n Save grocery store, the Hill House's work has become more daunting and its model more nebulous.

To help it get a handle on its assets and obligations, the Hill House brought in Pete Mendes, a financial consultant who specializes in working with organizations undergoing dramatic transitions, to serve as acting executive director beginning in 2014. According to Mr. Mendes, the root of the

organization's crisis lies in its lack of expertise in real estate management, which has led to a growing debt load. And while, in the past, organizations like the Hill House could count on government block grants to shore them up, today, "funders are asking more questions and demanding more answers," Mr. Mendes said.

In more than half a century of ministering to the varied, often formidable needs of the community, Hill House has never faced an existential crisis like the one it faces now. Even so, its leaders remain confident of its future vitality because of its pivotal role in the community.

The organization is "meeting ongoing needs so individuals can have a reasonable life," said Emma Lucas-Darby, Hill House board chair. "It's critically important for us to have a healthy organization, and I'm pleased to say that a lot of organizations feed off these services."

Carmen Anderson, the Endowments' director of Equity and Social Justice, echoed that sentiment.

"The Hill House, in my mind, is a cornerstone in the community, both literally and figuratively, based on its prominence, its historical significance and its potential for the future," she said. "The Endowments has been one of several foundations that have tried to be strategically supportive to ensure its viability going forward. But I think the board and the community together really need to decide the role it will play moving ahead."

With Omicelo poised to buy four Hill House buildings, the developer's interest indicates that the organization's properties are viable for development. But in the long run, as Mr. Mendes sees it, the perpetuation of the Hill House is critical.

"The last thing anyone wants is economic development creating a chasm between the haves and have-nots," he said. "It's important that organizations that provide human services are there to fill the gap." **h**