

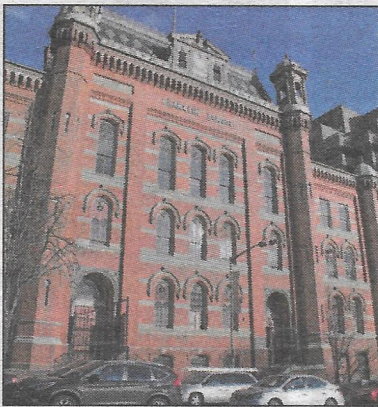
Projects to spruce up Franklin Square area

By **GRACE BIRD**
Current Staff Writer

After years of neglect, renovations are in the works for two storied District relics — Franklin School and the adjacent Franklin Square park.

The vacant Franklin School, located at 13th and K streets NW, is set to become a museum, while the park will be revitalized with various new amenities.

The 1869 school building had operated as a 300-bed homeless shelter until its abrupt closure in 2008. Years of uncertainty about its future ended in January when Mayor Muriel Bowser selected Planet Word, a language-related museum, to lease the property



Susann Shin/Current file photo

The historic Franklin School is slated to become a museum.

from the city. Bowser's administration had nixed earlier development plans for the site soon after

taking office.

Former reading and writing teacher Ann Friedman has pledged to fund the cost of the museum's \$25 million renovation and to offer free admission. If approved, the city will provide the school building to Friedman on a 99-year-lease at a rate of \$10 a year.

"We know that people are reading less, especially for pleasure," Friedman said in an interview. "I thought if I could find a new, exciting, innovative way to attract people to reading and speaking and listening, it would bolster democracy because we'd have a more educated, literate citizenry."

Ward 2 D.C. Council member Jack Evans expressed support for
See **Franklin**/Page 17

NORTHWEST REAL ESTATE

FRANKLIN: Downtown building, park due for extensive overhauls as projects advance

From Page 1

the museum. Franklin School's age and historic status make the site costly to renovate, he told *The Current*, so a privately funded public amenity is an ideal solution. Opening a new public school at the site was never on the table, Evans said.

Late last month, the D.C. Council's Committee on Transportation and the Environment supported designating the property as surplus, and companion legislation to approve a lease for the site is pending before the Committee on Business and Economic Development. The two committees held a joint hearing on the bills Sept. 20, and council action on the surplus designation legislation is expected next month.

Design plans for the museum, designed by architecture firm Beyer Blinder Belle, are also progressing. The project is slated to come before the Historic Preservation Review Board on Nov. 2, and Advisory Neighborhood Commission 2F (Logan Circle) voiced unanimous support on Oct. 4.

The latest designs include a new restaurant, office and storage space on the ground floor; classrooms, receptions and an auditorium on the first floor; display space on the second floor; a great hall and changing exhibits on the third floor; and an event

space on the fourth floor. Planet Word is slated to open in December 2019. The latest designs can be accessed at bit.ly/2hYGtTi.

When Franklin School shelter closed in 2008, historic preservationists rallied to restore the site as an educational or cultural public facility such as a school, community college, university or museum. Bill Brown, president of the Association of the Oldest Inhabitants of D.C. and member of a coalition formed in 2009 to preserve Franklin School, expressed support for Planet Word.

"Our drive was to restore and conserve the Franklin School for educational or cultural use, something other than a commercial venture," Brown said in an interview.

Architecturally, Franklin School is striking: Architect Adolf Cluss adorned the building with marble floors, ornate cast-iron stair railings and frescoed walls intended to, he said, foster a sense of equality among District residents. The school opened in 1869 as the flagship public school of seven that were built in D.C. from 1862 to 1872. At a time when the country's public schools generally operated out of individual rooms, Franklin School marked the start of free, universal education in D.C. (although Franklin was only available to white students).

Franklin School switched from academic to administrative use in the 1920s, and the

site housed the Board of Education's headquarters until 1968, when city officials proposed to sell the building to private developers. Preservationists fought back, and Franklin School made the National Register

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of Historic Places several years later while being used as an adult education center.

Adjacent to Franklin School is a 4.8-acre public park called Franklin Square, which is poorly maintained and occupied by a number of homeless people. Its renovation — priced at about \$9 or \$10 million, according to Evans — is also in the design stages, set to include new public amenities like restrooms, seating and a playground, as well as restoration of its broken infrastructure.

The land is owned by the National Park Service, so while the city and the DowntownDC Business Improvement District

have pledged to fund the project, the District must secure federal approval to enter into a cooperative agreement. A bill that would permit the city to help manage Park Service land, introduced by D.C. Del. Eleanor Norton, is currently moving through the U.S. House of Representatives. But according to BID director Neil Albert, designs are advancing in the meantime.

"It's not slowing us down because we're working on parallel tracks here," Albert said. "Hopefully the legislative portion of it will be done by the time we're ready to go to construction."

The city is currently in the process of selecting an architect, Albert said, after which a six-month design process will kick off. The city will proceed to select a general contractor, Albert said, and expects to break ground on the site by fall 2018. Construction is expected to take about 18 to 24 months.

ANC 2F chair John Fanning said in an interview that he supports plans to revitalize a "dark and dormant" corner of the neighborhood but worries about the fate of the "hundreds" of homeless people who reside at the square.

"The park has kind of been neglected," he said. "But the city and the community need to come up with the plan to improve outreach for the homeless people."