

MAC helped bring back East Butte

Editorial by Don Peoples, Jr., Montana Standard, 7/7/11

I enjoyed reading The Montana Standard's recent article on the revitalization of Butte's East Side, and the importance of Butte-Silver Bow's second tax increment district. That district encompasses what was once the location of vibrant neighborhoods, schools and churches.

It is refreshing and exciting to see development of this area, which was demolished to make room for mining activities that never materialized. As the area begins to come back to life, congratulations are due to private investors and the tax increment program.

However, I found it interesting that The Montana Standard's reporter neglected to mention several of the earliest and most extensive projects that led to the East Side redevelopment. These include the Belmont Senior Center, the grassy-sloped area on the southeast corner of the Belmont headframe, the Berkeley Pit Viewing Stand, the Maroon Activities Center and the Torger Oaas Football Field.

Without a doubt these projects were the genesis of the East Side development and without their development, confidence would not have occurred for the current redevelopment efforts now underway.

I would be remiss to neglect mentioning CCCS, AWARE, Inc., the Butte Public Housing Authority, and Continental Public Land Trust (CPLT), for their significant efforts in developing other parts of the development. These, too, were neglected by The Montana Standard's report on the East Side revitalization.

As the executive director of the Butte Central Education Foundation, let me address the impact of the Maroon Activities Center, commonly referred to as the MAC. There can be no question that the MAC has had a remarkable impact on not only the East Side redevelopment, but also the entire Butte Community.

The 19 acres where the MAC and the adjoining Torger Oaas Football Field sit was acquired from MERDI, which received significant east side properties from the Washington Corp. MERDI first offered the property to the YMCA and later to the Carousel Project. Both of these organizations had their reasons for declining acceptance of the property for their planned development.

The Butte Central Foundation accepted the property, which provided the impetus for the construction of the Walsh/MacLeod Arena and the Torger Oaas Football Field. In total, the entire property where the MAC and the Torger Oaas Football Field sit encompasses a significant portion of the entire new tax increment district.

The original intent for the MAC was to provide needed practice facilities for Butte Central athletic teams. For over 100 years, Butte Central did not have facilities to conduct their athletic activities, and were dependent on rental of public facilities when available.

As the project evolved, the Butte Central Foundation and its supporters decided to build a larger facility to serve not only Butte Central students, but also the entire community. An

aggressive campaign resulted in the construction of one of Montana's finest high school arenas. The MAC, with its 3,200-seat main arena, has served not only Butte Central but also the community at large.

The MAC is perhaps one of the busiest buildings in Butte. Now, in its sixth year of operation, it opens every morning and remains busy with activities until late evening. Not only is the building open for Butte Central teams, but is also available for a variety of uses including adult and senior citizen fitness programs, family celebrations, wedding receptions, club volleyball programs, neighborhood and class reunions, benefits for families in medical crises, bridge tournaments and Frontier Conference basketball tournaments.

The MAC is especially proud of the impact it has on the Butte community. A NorthWestern Energy economist recently calculated the economic impact of the MAC's activities using a State Chamber of Commerce formula.

That economist estimated that visitors to the MAC generate over \$2.5 million annually to the Butte economy. In six years of operation the MAC has added between \$14 million and \$15 million to our local economy.

As the East Side redevelopment moves ahead, we look forward to being a strong supporter of the redevelopment efforts. The redevelopment efforts are indeed exciting, and the MAC and the Butte Central Foundation want to be an active participant as we expand and improve our facilities.

We are especially looking forward to the massive American flag display to take place on the grassy slope east and south of the Belmont headframe in July. This display, which is sponsored by the Butte Exchange Club, will be stark evidence that the East Side development project is alive and well, and will continue to be part of Butte's economic future.

As we look to that future, the Maroon Activities Center is committed to support the continued growth of Butte's East Side. We are excited to be part of this positive redevelopment effort and we look forward to bigger and better things for Uptown Butte and our community.

— Don Peoples, Jr. is the executive director of the Butte Central Education Fund.