

Eyesore to 'oasis'

Abandoned buildings on Mangum to be transformed into Head Start/Early Head Start Center

By **Greg Densmore**
Editor

Thanks to an influx of federal stimulus funds, the abandoned, empty buildings and parking lot on Mangum — just north of West 43rd — will soon be transformed from a neighborhood eyesore into a well-designed and attractive Head Start/Early Head Start Center and Elementary Education Young Learners Charter School.

"We've signed a lease and the federal office has given its approval," said Jose Villarreal, executive director of AVANCE Houston, a United Way and Head Start agency. The agency provides Head Start programs in Houston to enhance parenting skills, promote family literacy and provide early childhood development programs.

"We're using the ARRA (American Rehabilitation and Recovery Act) money to build a bridge and expand our services in northwest Houston," Villarreal explained.

Site of the original Randall's Food Market, the Mangum Street property that has been home to a variety of failed businesses will now get new life "as an educational oasis for children from low-income families," he said.

The three existing buildings situated on the property will be renovated during a "fast-track" construction project that is scheduled to be completed by the start of the next

school year, said Villarreal. Contractor for the project will be Christy and Associates, which also built AVANCE Houston's new facility on Jensen.

"D-Day is Aug. 23," Villarreal said. "We don't know if everything will be finished by then — such as landscaping and such — but the inside will be ready to go, ready for the little ones."

The two smaller, southernmost buildings, each about 54,000 square feet, will house the Head Start and Early Head Start Centers, while the larger 15,770-square-foot building will house the Young Learners Charter School. The project will also include landscaping, covered walkways and parking for 192 in the massive, 198,000-square-foot parking lot.

The Early Head Start Center will be for infants to three-year-olds and will feature five classrooms — one for infants and four for toddlers. The Head Start Center, which provides services for children ages three to five, will feature eight classrooms.

The Early Head Start and Head Start Centers will also have two large rooms for parents to meet, rooms for specialists to work with children (speech therapy, etc.) and a full commercial kitchen that will cook and serve children breakfast, a morning snack, lunch and afternoon snack.

There will also be two playgrounds — one for toddlers and another for those three and

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four years of age.

It is projected that the Early Head Start Center will house 36 students, while the Head Start Center will house 152.

A total of 45 people will be employed at the Centers, most of them (41) Head Start personnel and included two custodians and two cooks.

AVANCE Houston officials hope to use an open space in the middle of the Head Start Centers for adult education classes.

The Young Learners Charter School will house students from kindergarten through fifth grade, said Villarreal, and will include some neighborhood children.

"We're very excited about this project, which will provide top quality services for low-income families," he said. "We'll be ready to hit the ground running."