

Press Release

December 13, 2013

CONTACT: Estella Espinosa
Work: (832) 395-7022
Cell: (832) 465-4782
estella.espinosa@houstontx.gov

\$4.2 Million Project Saves Historic Bethel Church Site As Newest Houston Park Grand Opening To Celebrate Fourth Ward's Past, Present, and Future

Mayor Annise Parker, Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone #14/Fourth Ward Redevelopment Authority and the Houston Parks and Recreation Department will celebrate the grand opening of Houston's newest historic site, Bethel Park (801 Andrews, 77019), on Saturday, December 14, 2013, at 10:30 a.m. The \$4.2 million project preserves the history and architecture of Bethel Missionary Baptist Church while creating a new park in Houston's fourth ward.

"Bethel Park has risen from the ashes created by a fire in 2005 to forever memorialize the historic significance the Fourth Ward plays in Houston's history," said Mayor Annise Parker. "This park and the preservation of Reverend Jack Yates' church will continue to inspire visitors through a unique open space that celebrates and preserves Freedmen's Town history."

Funding for this project was provided by the Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone #14/Fourth Ward Redevelopment Authority and the City of Houston.

"The Fourth Ward Redevelopment Authority had a moral obligation to the Freedmen's Town community to exhaust its efforts to save this structure. History can never be lost as long as the story is able to be told," said Jackie Bostic, Chair, Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone #14/Fourth Ward Redevelopment Authority. "The historic preservation effort in repurposing Bethel Church into Bethel Park has become the anchoring symbol of the resilience of the African American community not only in the City of Houston, but in Freedmen's Towns throughout the United States."

Bethel Missionary Baptist Church was founded in the Nineteenth Century by Reverend Jack Yates, an early leader of Houston's African American community. Located in Freedmen's Town, a post-Civil War Houston neighborhood founded by freed slaves, the church had three sanctuaries on the same site, with the earliest constructed in the 1890's.

The first was a wood framed structure that blew down as a result of the 1900 "Great Storm" in Galveston. The second wood framed structure was erected in the early 1900's and had a 40 foot

tower. It was destroyed by fire in 1920. In 1923, a third church single floor building was erected. In 1950, second and third floors were added to the church. This sanctuary was designed by James M. Thomas, a prominent architect of African American churches. In January 2005, a fire gutted the interior of the historic structure.

"This park is an important addition to this neighborhood," said Joe Turner, Director, Houston Parks and Recreation Department. "In the middle of urban renewal, a tranquil piece of history will remind us that this city was built by people with dreams and visions for a better life for their families. We are honored that the history of Bethel Missionary Baptist Church, its founders & the Fourth Ward Community will live on in Bethel Park."

The scope of work included: the restoration of the brick walls and window openings; removal of the exterior temporary stabilization bracing and installation of the interior permanent bracing; installation of new metal panels and poly-resin glass panels in both the window and door openings; installation of new metal panels and poly-resin glass panels for the south wall; concrete and brick walkways; installation of an artificial turf interior courtyard; and site amenities including raised fountains, seat walls, benches, lighting, drinking fountain, fencing, landscaping and irrigation. A particular highlight of the park is the historic education panels mounted throughout the space. Total project cost with property acquisition, bracing, design and park development: \$4,667,575.00.

About Bethel Missionary Baptist Church

Founded in the late 1800's by Reverend John H. (Jack) Yates, Bethel Missionary Baptist Church is located in Freedmen's Town, a post-Civil War Houston neighborhood founded by freed slaves. The Church has had three sanctuaries on the same site, with the earliest constructed in the 1890's. The first was a wood framed structure that blew down as a result of the 1900 "Great Storm" in Galveston. The second wood framed structure was erected in the early 1900's and had a 40 foot tower. It was destroyed by fire in 1920. In 1923, a third church single floor building was erected. In 1950, a second and third floor were added to the church. This sanctuary was designed by James M. Thomas, a prominent architect of African American churches. In January 2005, a fire gutted the interior of the historic structure. In 2009, the City of Houston provided emergency wall stabilization and minor structural repairs due to the unsafe conditions of the building. The city also purchased the property in order to preserve the church's façade and provide park space for the community. The goal of the project was to pay tribute to Bethel's significant history and architecture, as well as the history of the Fourth Ward.

About Freedmen's Town

The Houston city charter of 1839 organized the city into four wards. The fourth (Fourth Ward) is located just southwest of downtown Houston, along the south bank of Buffalo Bayou. It extended south of Congress Avenue and west of Main Street to the city limits. While it was originally established as a political subdivision, and at least through the nineteenth century it housed more whites than blacks, the area is best known as one of Houston's oldest and most important black neighborhoods. Due to a Houston population boom in the 1930s, white-owned businesses and major roadways encroached on the Fourth Ward, resulting in the displacement of many residents and Freedmen's Town gradually gave way to urban expansion.

About the Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone No. 14/Fourth Ward Redevelopment Authority

The Fourth Ward Redevelopment Authority (the "Authority") is a non-profit local government corporation created by and operating on behalf of the City of Houston and administers Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone Number Fourteen, City of Houston, Texas ("TIRZ #14"). The Authority was created by Houston's City Council on June 9, 1999, to aid, assist and act on behalf of the City in the performance of its governmental function for the common good and general welfare of the area included in Reinvestment Zone Number Fourteen, City of Houston, Texas, to promote, develop, encourage and maintain housing, educational facilities, employment, commerce and economic development in the City.

About the Houston Parks and Recreation Department

The Houston Parks and Recreation Department (H.P.A.R.D.) stewards and manages over 37,832 acres of parkland and greenspace for the City of Houston and develops and implements recreational programming for citizens of all abilities. For more information on the Houston Parks and Recreation Department, call (832) 395-7022 or visit www.houstonparks.org.

Bethel Park Grand Opening Parking Options

Bethel Park | 801 Andrews Street, Houston, TX, 77019

Please be aware that parking at Bethel Park is very limited. Additional FREE parking has been secured and a FREE shuttle service will be provided for the Bethel Park Grand Opening on December 14, 2013. The FREE shuttle service will run from 9:30 am - 12:00 noon from all 3 FREE parking locations.

We ask that you arrive early and take advantage of the satellite parking and enjoy the Bethel Park Grand Opening!

The 3 FREE public parking sites with shuttle service are located at:

- 1 - The African American Library at the Gregory School
1300 Victor St., Houston, TX 77019
- 2 - Carnegie Vanguard High School
1501 Taft Street, Houston, TX 77019
- 3 - Gregory Lincoln Education Center
1101 Taft St, Houston, TX 77019

