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Effort working to bring Boys and Girls Club to Aurora



By Megan Jones
Beacon-News

After serving as an assistant principal for a middle school in Elgin and seeing the after-school programs of the Boys and Girls Club, Aurora resident Darnell Gibson started to question why the state's second-biggest city didn't have its own chapter of the group.

Gibson, who grew up on the East Side of Aurora as one of 10 siblings, said he really could have benefited from having more after-school and mentoring programs similar to the ones the national organization has at more than 4,000 clubs across the U.S.

After the pandemic caused delays, the grassroots effort to bring a Boys and Girls Club to Aurora is kicking off with a local fundraiser on Saturday at O'Malley's Pub and Eatery, 701 Hill Ave. in Aurora.

"I'll probably be in tears on Satur-

day because this is a start," Gibson said. "We need to continue this push because we are shortchanging these kids."

He said he hopes "to eventually get other organizations to join in if we get a stand-alone building and host a dance team, karate, mentoring programs. That's the dream."

The Boys and Girls Club of Elgin serves 1,500 kids daily at 32 sites throughout the suburbs and also runs out of school support programs for children from 6 to 18 years old for little to no cost to the student, said Cathy Russell, CEO of the group.

From helping tutor students to providing a warm meal each day and providing career development, the club strives to serve as extra support outside of the classroom for students, she said.

After speaking with Gibson, Russell began helping and forming a team to look into bringing a Boys and Girls

Club to Aurora. The organizers of the O'Malleys event, including Aurora attorney Michael Poulakidas, hope to raise \$50,000 at the Saturday fundraiser.

Gibson began the work to drum up interest in the project by setting up 30 interviews with community stakeholders, like Mayor Richard Irvin, the city's police chief and pastors, to get a sense of the city's need for a Boys and Girls Club.

"We were really gaining steam before COVID hit and then it sat and it was really difficult to get people together," Poulakidas said. "Once things started opening back up again, we wanted to really utilize the Christmas holiday season and the giving spirit to try and put this fundraiser together to give the organization a head of steam."

After the fundraiser, Russell said

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Cathy Russell is the CEO of the Boys and Girls Club of Elgin, which is working with a group looking to bring a Boys and Girls Club to Aurora. RAFAEL GUERRERO/COURIER-NEWS



Volunteer Ethan Williams, 26, of Oswego, helps a visitor pick out pet supplies Wednesday at the Aurora Area Interfaith Food Pantry in Aurora. DAVID SHAROS/BEACON-NEWS

Billionaire pushes GOP to back candidates

Aurora mayor would potentially filling the slot for governor, sources say

By Rick Pearson
Chicago Tribune

Forces aligned with billionaire Ken Griffin are pushing the Illinois Republican Party to back his preferred slate of candidates for 2022 and are focusing on Aurora Mayor Richard Irvin as a candidate for governor, sources familiar with the planning said Thursday.

In exchange for the Illinois GOP's first modern-day endorsement of a slate of statewide candidates, Griffin would help underwrite the state party financially while also pumping at least \$150 million into the race for governor, the sources said.

Although much of the discussion on a candidate to challenge first-term Democrat Gov. J.B. Pritzker has centered on Irvin, the two-term mayor of Aurora, no final decision has been made, said the sources, who asked not to be identified because they were not authorized to speak to the media.

But an announcement on Griffin's choice for governor and in other races is expected in early January, shortly before candidates can begin circulating petitions to appear on the June 28 primary ballot.

Besides Irvin, who was elected as Aurora's first Black mayor in 2017, the tentative ticket also includes state Rep. Avery Bourne as lieutenant governor. Bourne, 29, a three-term lawmaker from Downstate Morrisonville, is widely viewed as a future star in the party.

Neither Irvin nor Bourne responded to a request for comment.

Griffin is the founder and CEO of the Chicago-based Citadel investment firm and the state's wealthiest person, worth \$20.9 billion, according to Forbes. A source close to Griffin said talk of his

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Aurora pantry's pet food program called a 'godsend'

Program designed for animal lovers in need

By David Sharos
For Beacon-News

Food scarcity for families, a problem that has increased throughout the pandemic, has also struck home for pet owners in Aurora, a fact that tugs at the heartstrings of officials at a food pantry in the city.

"We know that there are people and all they really have in their life is their pet — their dog or their cat," said Becky Dunnigan, outreach and program coordinator for the Aurora Area Interfaith Food Pantry. "For them to have to part with their pet because they couldn't afford to feed it, well, it was heartbreaking. These families would either

feed their pet their food or have to get rid of their pet, and we didn't want either of those things to happen, so we started a pet food pantry."

The current program, which offers a two-hour pet food pickup on the third Wednesday of every month, actually began just before the pandemic at the end of 2019 when the facility first offered a "pet pantry," Dunnigan said.

"We'd hand out enough pet food for about 30 days per pet, and everyone could get enough for two pets in their household," she said. "We had to run it as a drive-thru during the pandemic where we gave away food."

Aurora Area Interfaith Food Pantry Exec-

utive Director Shannon Cameron admits keeping the food pantry stocked with pet food and supplies "has been a bit of a struggle" but credits partnerships with the Northern Illinois Food Bank, the Anderson Humane Center, Pet Supplies Plus and others for helping to make the program work.

Aurora Animal Care and Control "has also been donating as well, and sometime we get returns from Walmart and Meijer," Cameron said. "When we started, we used to offer the food pick-up once every other month but we saw that was not enough and increased this to once a month. There is a need for it."

Cameron said economic factors have put more stress on needy families with pets

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Kane County to keep vaccination hub open until end of January

By Megan Jones
Beacon-News

After many Kane County Board members said they felt blindsided by the decision to close the county's COVID-19 vaccination hub and several residents spoke out on the issue, the Kane County Health Department announced Thursday it will extend the use of the facility until the end of January.

The current VaxHub is located in a vacant retail space at 501 N. Randall Road in Batavia that formerly housed a Sam's Club.

Residents can check for appointment availability at www.kanevax.com, officials said. The facility is typically open on Wednesdays

and Saturdays. As of Thursday morning, no appointments were listed on the website past Jan. 5.

During Tuesday's Kane County Board meeting, Board Chair Corrine Pierog said she'd like to continue operations at the vaccination site in Batavia until the end of May.

Interim Kane County Health Department Executive Director Kathy Fosser said her staff has been struggling to locate enough vaccines and find enough staff to administer the vaccinations. She recently moved nurses from other projects like the county's high-risk infants program to help at the vaccination hub.

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Victor Torres receives his Moderna COVID-19 vaccine from Barb Parness in the spring at Kane County's mass vaccination hub in Batavia. STACEY WESCOTT/CHICAGO TRIBUNE



Tom Skilling's forecast High 39 Low 33

Chicago Weather Center: Forecast on back page

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Aurora City Council approves \$83 million tax levy

By Steve Lord
Beacon-News

The Aurora City Council this week approved a total tax levy of about \$83.48 million for the city.

The levy is what the city asks for from taxpayers in property taxes. It includes about \$79.4 million for city operations, with the rest going toward debt.

City officials have said the levy for 2021 is the same as

in 2020. With assessed value expected to go up, it should lower the tax rate, meaning a lower amount of property taxes per person paid to the city in 2022.

The city anticipates taking about \$17 of every \$100 in property taxes paid.

The city gets revenue from a number of different places, but the property tax levy provides a major share. It is about 20% of revenue for all city funds, and about

46% of the revenue for the General Fund, which is the basic operating fund for city services.

The City Council last week approved an overall city budget of \$529 million for 2022.

Aldermen also approved levying the taxes for 14 special service areas, or SSAs, that are active in the city. A special service area levies a tax on a specified group of taxpayers or section of the

city for a specific reason.

The largest special service area is SSA Number One, which is for downtown revitalization and to pay for specific services downtown, such as snow removal.

It is administered by Aurora Downtown, a not-for-profit group that promotes the downtown. City officials said \$220,000 goes to Aurora Downtown each year, which is the lion's share of the total of \$337,466

levied for all 14 SSAs.

Aldermen also approved abating \$7.3 million in property taxes that will be levied, then abated back to the taxpayers. The money is levied automatically to satisfy the debt service, but abated because the city does not need it.

"For several years, the city has abated all or a portion of its property tax levies for (general obligation) debt service because we have

had other revenue sources available to cover required debt service," wrote Chris Minick, the city's chief financial officer, in a memo to the council.

The \$7.3 million is higher than the normal abatement each year because the city is no longer paying for the Aurora Public Library's debt service. That will be up to the new library district to levy.

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State in talks to sell Thompson Center for \$70 million

Would buy back office space for more than double sale price

By Dan Petrella
Chicago Tribune

The state of Illinois is in final negotiations to sell the James R. Thompson Center for \$70 million to a developer who would spare one of the Loop's most iconic — and controversial — buildings from the wrecking ball, Gov. J.B. Pritzker announced Wednesday.

But the deal, which the Pritzker administration expects to finalize by spring, would see the state buy back a third of the renovated building for about \$148 million, a net cost to the state of roughly \$78 million, officials clarified at a briefing following the governor's announcement.

Despite the cost, the administration said the arrangement is a good deal for taxpayers because the state otherwise would have to purchase or lease another building to maintain a portion of its workforce in the Loop. The plan also calls for the developer to significantly overhaul the Thompson Center's aging interior.

Pritzker has been trying to unload the 17-story office building — designed by renowned architect Helmut Jahn, who was killed in bicycle accident in May — since taking office in 2019. The sale

was something his predecessor, Republican Bruce Rauner, pushed for years but never got done, though that didn't stop lawmakers from counting on \$300 million in theoretical revenue from the proposed sale to balance the state budget in 2018.

The state selected a company led by Michael Reschke, chairman and CEO of real estate developer The Prime Group, as the buyer from the two bids submitted this fall. Reschke's JRTC Holdings is working with Jahn's firm on its plan to revamp a building that has inspired strong opinions since opening in 1985.

The redevelopment plan calls for installing a glass curtain wall to separate the office floors from the soaring atrium, which should alleviate many of the heating and cooling issues and noise problems the building has faced during its lifetime, Reschke said.

"That atrium will become the monumental entrance to the future office building, and it will be unlike any other entrance in the city, and for that matter in the country," he said.

While the state and the developer are still finalizing terms, plans call for the state to own and occupy about 425,000 of the building's 1.2

million square feet.

"State employees will be there to support the Loop's continued economic revitalization for years to come," Pritzker said at a news conference at the Thompson Center to announce the tentative deal.

Selling the building will save the state, and taxpayers, an estimated \$20 million per year over the next 30 years by consolidating office leases and reducing operating expenses, according to the governor's office.

In addition to office and retail space in a prime Loop location, the redeveloped building could eventually include a hotel on the upper levels, Reschke said.

He estimated the overhaul will take about two years at a cost of about \$280 million, below the \$325 million price tag the state has cited for needed upgrades.

The CTA's Clark/Lake station that occupies part of the building would remain in operation throughout construction. State offices will continue to occupy upper levels of the building while lower floors are renovated for their use.

The other bid the state received came from a group led by Bob Dunn's Landmark Development, the firm behind an ambitious

and as yet unrealized project near Soldier Field called One Central. The proposed mixed-use development is being pitched as a potential site for a city casino but is reliant on \$6.5 billion in state financing over 20 years that so far hasn't won support in Springfield.

At the Thompson Center, the Landmark group's proposal called for demolishing the existing building and remaking the site as a mixed-use high-rise development with the state as an anchor tenant.

The state is moving forward, meanwhile, with long-term plans to relocate much of its downtown workforce after paying \$73.3 million in January to buy a 17-story, 429,316-square-foot Near West Side office building that was previously home to regional offices of PepsiCo.

Pritzker signed a bill in April 2019 authorizing the sale of the Thompson Center, but the coronavirus pandemic that came less than a year later sharply drove down demand for downtown commercial space.

In the third quarter of this year, commercial office space in Chicago's central business district had a vacancy rate of 17.7%, the highest level since 2010, according to commercial real estate services firm Newmark.

While questions remain about how the trend toward working from home as a result of COVID-19 will affect post-pandemic demand for office space, Reschke said he expects the Thompson Center development will attract strong interest from law firms and other companies due its proximity to City Hall, the Daley Center and other government buildings.

The governor's office said it expects to reach a final agreement to sell the building ahead of an April 5 deadline and to close on the transaction this summer.

To the chagrin of preservationists, who consider the Jahn building an iconic example of postmodern architecture, state officials previously had said they didn't have a preference about whether new owners tear down the existing structure.

But Pritzker said he was pleased that the building would largely be preserved and said the state is working to find another way to honor its namesake, former Republican Gov. James R. "Big Jim" Thompson, who died last year. Thompson had served on the board of directors two of Reschke's companies, Reschke said.

Preservationists also applauded Wednesday's announcement. Landmarks Illinois, which

has included the Thompson Center on its list of the state's most endangered historic places, said in a statement that it was "thrilled to hear the governor has selected a developer for the Thompson Center that plans to reuse the building instead of demolishing what is one of the most iconic and noted examples of Post Modernism in Chicago."

"This news is especially encouraging given that it comes at a time when the National Park Service is currently reviewing a National Register of Historic Places nomination for the building," the group said.

In June, a state advisory panel voted to nominate the building to the National Register of Historic Places over objections from the Department of Central Management Services and the State Historic Preservation Office. The state agencies argued in documents that the building is not a great example of postmodern architecture, that Jahn was not a premier practitioner of the style and that the Thompson Center was not one of his best works.

Still, the Historic Preservation Office went forward with submitting the nomination, commissioned by Landmarks Illinois.

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Candidates

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deciding on a slate of candidates or on any level of funding was pure speculation.

The source said Griffin has not met with Irvin or Bourne or made any money commitments to anyone in exchange for backing his preferred candidates, but welcomes new voices to replace "the current corrupt system in Springfield."

Griffin "has not decided yet who to support for governor" because the field hasn't been fully formed, the source said.

In a statement Thursday in response to questions about the 2022 campaign, Griffin said, "We have real prob-

lems in Illinois with violence, corruption and profligate spending and I look forward to supporting candidates — be it Republican or Democrat — who will address these issues that plague our state."

Griffin is an ardent opponent of Pritzker, a billionaire first-term governor and heir to the Hyatt Hotels fortune who's worth \$3.6 billion, according to Forbes.

Griffin spent \$22.5 million helping fund one-term Republican Gov. Bruce Rauner's losing reelection bid in 2018 against Pritzker, who spent more than \$170 million of his own money in his successful run.

Last year, Griffin spent \$53.75 million to successfully defeat Pritzker's push for a graduated-rate state income

tax system. Pritzker spent \$58 million to encourage its passage.

Griffin last month vowed to go "all in" against Pritzker's reelection but has not been satisfied with the four announced contenders for the GOP governor nomination — businessmen Gary Rabine of Bull Valley and Jesse Sullivan of Petersburg, state Sen. Darren Bailey of Xenia and former state Sen. Paul Schimpf of Waterloo.

But some Republicans are questioning the strategy of a Griffin-backed slate being pushed through a cash-hungry state GOP.

"These Griffin people behind the curtain, we don't know. Is it like the Wizard of Oz?" said one prominent Republican who asked not

to be identified because he didn't want to anger Griffin.

"I'm not saying they don't have any credibility, but it's a little bold to say to the Republican State Central Committee, 'OK boys and girls, line up. This is what we're going to do,'" the source said.

The Republican said he also didn't see the existing candidates for governor dropping out of the race, opening the door to further divisions within the state GOP.

Irvin, 51, grew up in Aurora public housing and was raised by a single mother. He joined the U.S. Army after graduating from East Aurora High School and served in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

After returning home,

he graduated from Robert Morris University and got a law degree from Northern Illinois University.

He previously was an assistant state's attorney in the Cook County and Kane County state's attorney's offices before opening his own private practice. In 2007, Irvin became the first Black male elected to the Aurora City Council as an at-large member, and held that post until his election as mayor.

A bid for governor would represent a change of heart. In October, he laughed off a Tribune reporter's question about a gubernatorial run or whether he had been in talks with Griffin.

There are also questions about Irvin's positions on

social issues that run counter to those held by the GOP base. Irvin supports immigrant rights, and implementing sanctuary city-style policies with law enforcement for immigrants who lack legal status.

Irvin also declared a day in honor of the state's director of public health, Dr. Ngozi Ezike, who has been a driving force in Pritzker's pandemic restrictions and in urging vaccinations — positions most of the current field of GOP governor candidates have opposed.

In addition, Irvin cast a Democratic ballot in four of the last five primary elections, including last year, Kane County officials said.

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40 horses saved from South Elgin building fire

\$1.5M in exotic cars a total loss

By Gloria Casas
For Courier-News

A fire at a South Elgin horse farm destroyed a building and \$1.5 million in exotic cars, but about 40 horses were spared thanks to the work of volunteers and two off-duty firefighters, according to the South Elgin & Countryside Fire Protection District.

South Elgin was alerted to the blaze about 7:40 p.m. Tuesday in the 9N700 block of Nesler Road and firefighters arrived to find an outbuilding on fire and flames threatening two other nearby structures, one of which was a 27,000-square-foot horse stable and arena, Battalion Chief Justin Cox said.

Jon Pollock, an off-duty South Elgin firefighter who lives near the site, saw the blaze and joined an off-duty Carpentersville firefighter, who was working at the stable, and several volunteers in evacuating the horses to a nearby church, Cox said.

While the building and several exotic cars stored inside were completely destroyed, fire crews "did



A fire at a South Elgin horse farm completely destroyed a building housing \$1.5 million in expensive cars, but about 40 horses in a nearby stable were rescued thanks to the work of several volunteers. MIKE ROTHECKER

an amazing job and sustain minimal damage to the two buildings," he said. The second building spared also housed exotic cars, he said.

Trailers were brought in to move the horses to other barns, Cox said. The fire department chaplain helped organize that effort.

Firefighters remained

on the scene for hours due to the amount of overhaul needed to ensure the fire was completely extinguished, Cox said. South Elgin received help from Elgin, Fox River, Bartlett, Pingree Grove, St. Charles, Rutland Dundee, West Dundee, Geneva, Carol Stream, North Aurora, Hanover Park, Bata-

via and Elburn fire departments.

The fire is under investigation, and the cause remains undetermined. No firefighters or horses were injured, Cox said.

Gloria Casas is a freelance reporter for The Courier-News.

Club

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they'll be looking for volunteers to help them hold future fundraisers to create at least one year's operating budget for an Aurora club, and to look for a place to run programming from in the city.

They would then reach out to schools in the Aurora area to see if they could partner with the club to provide programming. The clubs typically run arts and science, physical education and reading programs, particularly for elementary school students, Russell said.

By the beginning of the next school year, Russell said they'd like to have some programs started in Aurora.

On Saturday, raffle ticket sales for the fundraiser will begin at 11 a.m. at O'Malley's. The event itself will start at 6 p.m., with dinner served at 6:45 p.m. Funds raised will help support the creation of a new Boys and Girls Club of Aurora in 2022. Tickets can be purchased at www.omalleysaurora.com and cost \$100.

The Boys and Girls Club in Aurora Fund will be managed by the Community Foundation of the Fox River Valley, which

will establish the fund and create a vehicle for the group to accept donations until it has its own governing body. The Aurora fund will work as a subsidiary of the Elgin club because new clubs must fall under the umbrella of an existing club.

Julie Christman, CEO of the foundation, said there are several great youth organizations already in Aurora that the club could help support.

"They have a proven track record of success and their methods are shown to work," Christman said. "We don't have any national-based programs in Aurora, with no physical YMCA or YWCA, so it'd be great to bring something that has a record of success and has the capacity to work with the schools and organize all the players."

Mayor Richard Irvin said in a statement he looks forward to continuing conversations and plans concerning the club.

"We have a very committed and dedicated team of youth services providers in Aurora and the addition of the Boys and Girls Club would be an ideal supplement for a successful formula," Irvin said.

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