



Metra ground-breaking held for station serving Bellwood, Melrose Park

Site slated to be hub of new downtown serving both villages

By Joseph Ruzich • Special to the Tribune

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As the nation suffers through a recession, the blue-collar western suburbs of Bellwood and Melrose Park are dreaming of a bustling and modern downtown district, spurred on by a new \$15 million Metra train station.

A ground-breaking ceremony was held Tuesday for the station, which will include an indoor pedestrian bridge that connects to a 680-space, two-story parking garage. Village and state officials said the current Melrose Park and Bellwood train stops will be demolished to make way. Construction is slated to start next year.

The station, to be built near 25th and Grant Avenues in Bellwood, is the first phase of a transportation-oriented plan to redevelop 55 acres of village-owned properties in both villages—about 60 percent in Bellwood and 40 percent in Melrose Park—for a new shared downtown. Officials hope the area will be made of retail and housing, replacing the mostly industrial area it is now.

"We are really proud of this project," said Melrose Park Mayor Ronald Serpico. "This is going to be a great stimulus for the area."

President Anthony Bruno, of the Elmhurst-based Illinois Development Services Corp., said two-thirds of the train station project will be paid through tax-increment-financing dollars, with the rest to be paid using federal transportation grants.

Bellwood officials placed the area in a TIF district in 2006 and voted unanimously to fund the station, near Melrose Park's border, in August.

Union Pacific Railroad spokesman Mark Davis said his company has been in negotiations with Bellwood for two years.

Davis said Union Pacific has begun infrastructure work at the site, which will include realigning the tracks and making a new rail line to connect the adjacent Proviso train yard to the Indiana Harbor Belt rail line. He said the new rail line will help ease railroad congestion in the area.

The station's construction will start after infrastructure improvements are done in late 2009, Davis said. The three-story brick station also will include a clock tower and an adjacent ground-level parking lot.

Officials are betting that the station will lure developers.

"No one gave us any credence that we could do this," said Bellwood Mayor Frank Pasquale. "If the village is going to survive, we must have reliable transportation. Not only that, this new station will spur \$300 million in new development for the area. That's going to create jobs for people in this area."



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Creating tech connections

SCI-TECH SCENE | Bellwood, Triton College give community new opportunities in digital age
By Sandra Guy, Sun-Times Columnist

Shonice James, 16, wants to be a meteorologist but her interest in computers prompted her to take a free computer repair course at Bellwood's newest computer resource center.

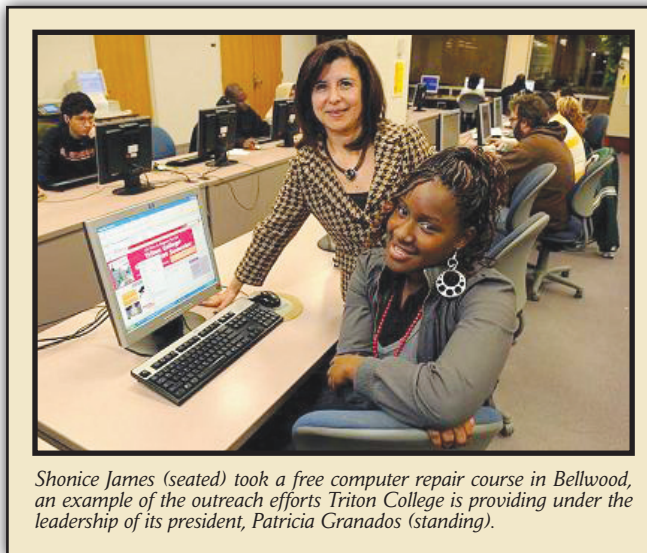
The two-semester course is taught by Triton College faculty. Students who complete the class "job shadow" members of Best Buy's Geek Squad. "The biggest surprise was how complex computers are," said James, a junior at Proviso West Mathematics and Science Academy. The upcoming semester requires the students to take apart "guinea pig" computers and install a variety of software.

Bellwood's second computer resource center, at 145 Eastern Ave. in a former industrial office building, is four times larger than its other center at 1125 Bellwood Ave. The center is among several high-tech initiatives for the blue-collar village of 22,000. Bellwood has provided three computers to each of its eight elementary schools, installed computers at the library, the park district and the Boys and Girls Club, and offered every household a \$200 rebate to buy a computer. So far, 600 households have taken advantage of the offer. The resource center is also one of Triton's outreach initiatives.

Triton College President Patricia Granados, 47, has a special connection to Bellwood: Her parents, who immigrated to the suburb from Mexico when she was in kindergarten, learned to speak English at a Triton ESL program. While Granados was in high school, she waited tables to save money for college. While at college at Northern Illinois University, she worked summers at Triton's Latino community center, Nuevos Horizontes/New Horizons, registering students for ESL classes. Granados eventually became the leader of the River Grove-based community center. Now, Triton runs and staffs a computer technology center at New Horizons, which has offered 500 students a total of 3,000-plus hours on the computers since it started two years ago. "I strongly believe in the philosophy of community colleges," Granados said. "Looking at my own life journey, being an immigrant, first generation, I know the

challenges people face trying to better their lives, and how important education is in strengthening a community."

Bellwood Mayor Frank A. Pasquale, an educator for 40 years before becoming mayor, said, "Great community colleges like Triton have become more important than ever in providing core educational services and opportunities to the local communities they serve. "I know from experience our community is really taking advantage of these opportunities."



Shonice James (seated) took a free computer repair course in Bellwood, an example of the outreach efforts Triton College is providing under the leadership of its president, Patricia Granados (standing).

Richard Pellegrino, executive director of the West Central Municipal Conference, a council of governments that includes Triton, said the programs are important to young people who can live at home while getting their college education.

Indeed, a report issued earlier this month found that published college tuition and fees increased 439 percent from 1982 to 2007, adjusted for inflation, while median family income increased 147 percent. Student borrowing also doubled in the last

decade, and students from lower-income families got smaller grants from the colleges they attended than did higher-income students, according to the report from the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. Triton has worked with Bellwood and Best Buy to win grants from the Illinois Commerce and Economic Opportunity Department, including one grant for \$75,000 that paid for equipment and teachers' salaries for the computer resource center in Bellwood, and for technical support from the Geek Squad. Triton and Best Buy made in-kind contributions to match the \$75,000 grant.

Triton College offers its students laptops on loan and hosts summer camps for high-school students to learn robotics and photography. The students learn to build robots using technology and automation, and learn about digital photography and how to put together a multimedia show.

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New train station start of \$300 million Bellwood, Melrose Park development.

By Dan McLeister, *Contributing Writer*

A new \$10 million to \$15 million combined train station and parking garage for Bellwood and Melrose Park is expected to be the catalyst for more development and investment in these villages and adjacent communities.

The combined train station will not only be the first Metra station built in predominantly minority communities, but it also will help foster more than \$300 million in new development and investment in Bellwood and adjacent communities, including a transportation-oriented development featuring 55-acres of residential and retail facilities, said Bellwood Mayor Frank A. Pasquale.

"The project will be the catalyst for our new downtown district," he said. "Bellwood is a natural transportation hub, and our residents and businesses need and deserve a modern new station to more easily travel around the Chicagoland area and suburbs. "People who live in the entire west Cook County region will benefit from this improved transportation option. We have high hopes that the new station will be an economic engine in more ways than one."

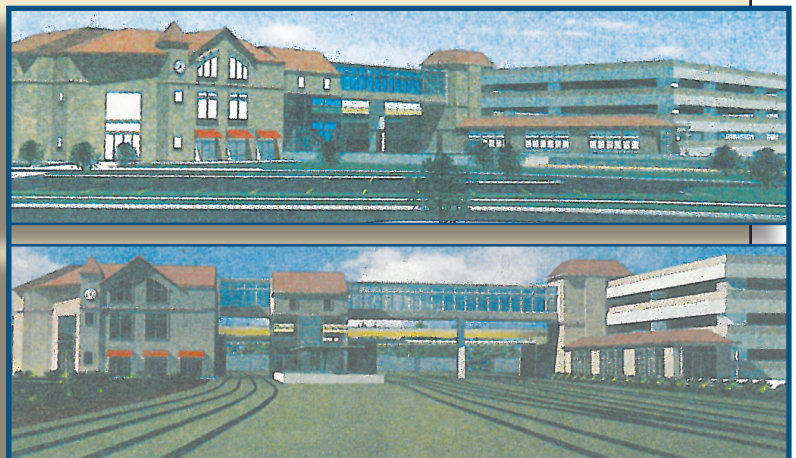
The new station at about 29th Avenue north of Grant Street along the Union Pacific West line will replace what officials said were outdated stations in the two villages and contained inadequate parking. The plan calls for a pedestrian crosswalk and a 680-space, two-story parking garage.

The land is located in a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) district created by Bellwood. In addition to TIF funds, federal government transportation grants will be used to build the facility. Infrastructure improvements will begin immediately and construction of the new station will start in about one year.

Melrose Park Mayor Ronald Serpico said the new station is a tremendous opportunity for economic

development in his village, which has about 17 acres of its land in the proposed development. "If we can get more people to come to the new station, then development will follow," he said. "The tired, older area, including land where there was a steel mill, could use a shot in the arm." Serpico said it is a win-win situation for both villages in the long term even though the current economic climate may not be conducive to developing related projects in the short term.

The mayor noted that there will be benefits for two minority communities--Bellwood, which has a large black population, and Melrose Park, which has a large Hispanic population. The combining of two train stations is unusual, according to Mark Davis, director of corporate relations for the Union Pacific northern region, who said he was unaware of any other situation where two train stations were combined. "Probably the greatest accomplishment is



Renderings of the new Bellwood-Melrose Park train station.

how two communities worked together," he said.

Davis added that the location of the new train station plan would help alleviate train congestion in the area which includes freight train traffic. The existing railroad tracks will be relocated.