

EVANSTON

The Aux, a hub of minority owned businesses, coming to Evanston

By Alex Hulvalchick

Pioneer Press

Published: Jan 16, 2024 at 6:22 pm



A rendering of plans for The Aux at 2223 Washington Street in Evanston. - Original Credit: Handout (Sunshine Enterprises/HANDOUT)

Loading your audio article

Construction has begun on The Aux, a \$10 million commercial hub on Washington Street in Evanston focusing on Black and minority-owned businesses, with expectations for a grand opening this fall.

The project, spearheaded by entrepreneurial training and mentorship company Sunshine Enterprises, will see a former vegetable processing plant be redeveloped into a hub housing an office for Sunshine Enterprise along

with businesses and vendors focusing on health and wellness. Sunshine's managing director of development and communications Trenton Blythe said the group has run programming in Evanston since 2015 and is excited to have a permanent home.

"The Aux will give us that stake in the ground that we've been looking for," he said. "Our bread and butter has been those entrepreneurs looking to formalize what is an informal business. They're doing this out of their garage, out of their kitchen, out of their back office. ... We come in and we teach them the business fundamentals."

The Aux began with a team of five co-developers, three of whom are graduates of Sunshine's programming. About 40 small business owners will graduate from the program each year once open, according to Blythe, and then receive wrap-around services from Sunshine, including mentorship, coaching and workshops.

"Those are all things that our entrepreneurs have for the lifetime of their entrepreneurial journey, whether it's the business they graduate with or the business they start five years down the road," Blythe said.



The Aux co-developers (from left to right) Tosha Wilson, Jacqui White, Lori Laser and Tiffini Holmes celebrate the groundbreaking. - Original Credit: Handout (Sunshine Enterprises/HANDOUT)

About 30 tenants have signed up to join The Aux, according to Blythe, including beauty services business Embrace Your Crown, recording and broadcast Studio AUX Podcast and Doula support services from Sokana Collective.

Another business coming to The Aux is The Laundry Cafe, co-owned by Highland Park Police Officer Jacqui White and City of Evanston Police Sergeant Tosha Wilson.

White, an alumni of Sunshine, said the wrap-around services she has received from Sunshine have been a huge help and she's excited to have them in the building to be able to speak with directly.

"The Laundry Cafe for us is community," she said. "This is a new venture for Tosha and I, so to be able to be in our community, it's huge for us. To provide

something that is so basic and necessary in terms of laundry but also that connection piece with the cafe space and programming, we really are looking forward to being a highlight staple in the building.”

Tiffini Holmes, another Sunshine graduate and co-developer for The Aux, works as a wellness coach with her company Well Beings Chicago. She has also given back to Sunshine, joining the ranks to become a coach and instructor to help mentor new entrepreneurs.

Well Beings Chicago is a tenant at The Aux as well, where those interested can find fitness classes, health coaching and other wellness help. Holmes said Sunshine helps give entrepreneurs a boost beyond what the average business would have starting off on its own and then gives them support when they need it most.

“I’m excited about the opportunity it represents for the entrepreneurs, the opportunity it represents for the community,” Holmes said. “It’s going to be a beacon of hope, love, joy, all the good things, where people are going to be able to prosper whether they are entrepreneurs in this space or just patronizing the space.”

The project is being funded through philanthropy, public funds and community equity. Community investors are able to provide funding to The Aux in order to have a greater stake in the success of the project and retain ownership of the property once the building is open, according to Blythe.

Lori Laser, founder of The Aux’s nonprofit partner The Growing Season, also teaches meditation and mindfulness at The Aux’s wellness collective alongside Holmes.

“This project from the very beginning has been about commitment to values, commitment to the way of doing things differently, about belonging in community,” Laser said.

She said having Sunshine on the project has helped to foster a business community that is less about competition and more about uplifting each other.

Sunshine alumni is predominantly female with Blythe estimating about three quarters of the 1,500 alumni are women. Of those alumni, Blythe said 54% are in business to some extent with a third in planning stages. A majority of those businesses are in the health and wellness sector but Sunshine has also

graduated entrepreneurs in the food service, construction and real estate/property management industries.

“We truly believe that entrepreneurship is a reasonable, legitimate path to revitalizing communities,” he said. “You’re not just giving them a boat, you’re teaching them how to sail it. And you’re teaching them how to buy more boats, buy bigger boats.”

An information session for Sunshine’s spring 2024 Community Business Academy is scheduled for Jan. 25 from 5:45 to 7 p.m. at the Office Depot co-working space at 2722 Green Bay Road in Evanston.

“Dreams, hopes, all of those things deserve our best effort,” Holmes said to those considering starting their own business. “I’m always going to be the one to tell you to go for it.”