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CHESTERFIELD

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County floats funding for new ballpark

Casey: New stadium for Squirrels hinges on city support for Henricus park

BY JIM McCONNELL SENIOR WRITER

As it encourages Richmond to invest in shared regional amenities, Chesterfield County is dangling a carrot that has been on the city's wish list for nearly two decades: funding for a new baseball stadium to replace The Diamond.

Chesterfield wants Richmond to join it and Henrico County as an equal partner in the operation of Henricus Historical Park, a living history museum located within the county's Dutch Gap Conservation Area. In return, Chesterfield has offered to help pay for a ballpark that would be used by both the Richmond Flying Squirrels and Virginia Commonwealth University.

The proposed quid pro quo was briefly outlined in a July 22 letter from Chesterfield County Administrator Joe Casey to the Board of Supervisors, a copy of which was recently obtained by the Observer.

"The county will continue to pursue broader participation at Henricus and other Chesterfield entities as economic conditions normalize," Casey wrote in the 18-page document, which he presented to the five-member board at the end of fiscal year 2020 as a status update on local priorities.

"Monies don't just flow one way anymore in this region," he said in a recent interview. "The standing offer [to the city], if you will, is if you want to be serious about a baseball stadium as part of a regional partnership, you also need to be serious about something that serves the region in Henricus."

Jim Nolan, press secretary for Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney, didn't respond to a request for comment by the Observer's press team

See **BALLPARK** on page 5



A SIGN OF THE TIMES

Local "Green Book" motel was a haven for Black travelers during the Jim Crow era. Soon, the site may again serve people in need

BY RICH GRISET STAFF WRITER

Rusted and weather-beaten, the old motel sign stood on Jefferson Davis Highway for more than half a century.

With its neon lettering broken and its original dark green paint faded to somewhere between sea green and gunmetal gray, the sign had clearly seen better days before its removal earlier this year. Reading "Colbrook Motel," it stood as a beacon for Black motorists seeking safe refuge prior to desegregation. The motel, one of the few places in Chesterfield where Black travelers could spend the night, opened

COURTESY OF
SUSAN HELLMAN

One of the few places Black travelers could stay overnight in Chesterfield during the Jim Crow era, the former Colbrook Motel on U.S. Route 1 is slated to become a new affordable housing community.

in 1946, more than a decade before Interstate 95 overtook U.S. Route 1 as the primary way to traverse the East Coast.

During the era of Jim Crow, a system of local and state laws that enforced racial segregation in the United States, the Colbrook Motel was the lone Chesterfield business highlighted in "The Negro Motorist Green Book," a national reference guide that listed Black-friendly establishments. As bus and train travel at the time

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COLBROOK MOTEL from page 1



COURTESY OF EARL BROOKS

An old postcard, left, featuring the Colbrook Motel, which served Black motorists from 1946 through desegregation. A photo taken in the 1960s, above, of William Brooks Sr. and his wife, Audrey, near the Colbrook Motel off Jefferson Davis Highway.

were governed by deeply discriminatory laws, cars gave African Americans more mobility than ever before, especially after the 1920s, when America's Black middle class began to grow through employment in northern industrial centers.

Still, these travelers needed to find a place to stay, eat and fill up on gas while venturing into unfamiliar areas. Though it wasn't the first, the Green Book became the most well-known travel guide for Black Americans during this time, publishing annually nearly every year from 1936 to 1966.

"The Green Book is very much about Black empowerment," says Catherine Zipf, a Rhode Island-based architectural historian who's researched and written about the subject. "These are places where you're not going to get the humiliation of

being turned away for being Black."

For travelers, the Colbrook was a safe place to rest after a long day of travel. For the local African American community, it was an established meeting place with good food that was run by proprietors with a sterling reputation.

And now history has caught up with the Colbrook, as the not-for-profit Better Housing Coalition, the county and a crew of volunteers are working to commemorate its past. A historical marker is in the works, and other efforts are underway to honor Chesterfield's Black community during the Jim Crow era. The motel's long-derelict buildings have been demolished, and the plan is to turn the site into an affordable housing development.

Once again, it looks like a complex bearing the name Colbrook will provide

shelter and community to people in need.

As a 44-year-old mail carrier in New York City, Victor Green was well versed in knowing where Black people could and could not go. Drawing from his own experiences and those of other mail carriers, he began compiling information on gas stations and hotels in and around the city that welcomed Black people, and in 1936, published this first volume as a guidebook for Black travelers in New York.

By 1938 he'd expanded the book to include localities in 21 states and Washington, D.C.; by the end of the Green Book's three-decade run, it would cover businesses in all 50 states, Canada, Mexico, Europe, Australia and the Caribbean.

With a maximum circulation of 20,000, the Green Book got a massive boost when

Esso (the trading name for ExxonMobil and related companies) gas stations began selling the books, as they were one of the few national chains to serve African Americans at the time. Especially following the 20th century's Great Migration – a term for the movement of millions of African Americans from the rural South to the Northeast, Midwest and West in search of economic opportunity and less pervasive discrimination – Black travelers were on the move more than ever.

Even before the release of the 2018 Mahershala Ali and Viggo Mortensen film that bears its name, the Green Book experienced a flurry of interest from researchers five years ago after the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture digitized the entire 30-year run of the Green Book and posted it online.

Among those researchers is Susan Hellman, who has created a website chronicling Virginia's Green Book businesses. On her site, Hellman has mapped each of Virginia's roughly 300 locations included in the guide and documented what state the structures are currently in. Presently, roughly 30 scholars in 20 states are working with the University of Virginia to build an online database documenting these sites and their historical importance.



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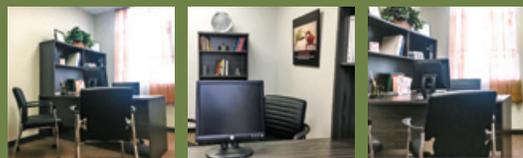
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“People are starting to realize that this is such an interesting part of our history that has been neglected,” Hellman says.

Located about a mile south of the U.S. Route 1/Virginia Route 10 intersection, the Colbrook Motel got its start when Black entrepreneurs William E. Brooks and Courtland Colson decided to purchase an existing log cabin-style motel and gas station in 1946. They named it by combining their surnames.

“The two of them put their heads together and figured out this would be a good place for a business and a good time for a business, specifically a motel, upscale, right there on Route 1,” says William “Earl” Brooks Jr., Brooks’ son, who lives in Reston.

Born in West Virginia, William Brooks Sr. grew up in the southwest corner of Pennsylvania, where he met Audrey Woods. After they married, William served with the Tuskegee Airmen in World War II and Audrey received her master’s in education. The couple then moved to the Petersburg area for teaching opportunities. It was through her connections at Virginia State College – now Virginia State University – that William met Colson and went into business with him on the motel. The Brookses eventually bought Colson out, erected additional buildings on the property and refurbished an adjoining tea room into a full-service restaurant, serving standard American fare like fried chicken, burgers, steaks and fried fish; deviled crabs were their most popular item.

“A lot of local people knew it was a nice place to stop, visit my dad, watch TV, listen to music on the old jukebox,” says Earl, 72. “There were several [Virginia State College] campus people that would come out every so often.”

Earl doesn’t remember the Green Book, but says his father actively pursued being featured in the more upscale “Go Guide to Pleasant Motoring,” which was also a guide for Black travelers in the United States. Though it was an independent publication, the Nationwide Hotel Association used it as its official directory; William Brooks was treasurer for the association.

Earnestine Wilson, 74, who is Black, frequented the Colbrook Motel as a teenager with her boyfriend at the time. Because of the Brookses’ reputation, Wilson says her parents always approved of her going there.

“It was a very nice place, the food was good, there was supervision,” says Wilson, a retired Chesterfield County Public Schools teacher and guidance counselor who is involved in the effort to commemorate the Colbrook. “They were

two people who really cared about young people and wanted them to do well in life.”

Over the years, Audrey Brooks would teach at VSC and serve as the principal of the Blacks-only D. Webster Davis High School on the university’s campus, and as guidance counselor and assistant principal of its successor, George Washington Carver High School, which is now Chesterfield’s Carver College and Career Academy.

The Brookses often helped teenagers who were down on their luck by employing them at the motel. At Carver, Audrey supervised the Delta Teen Club, providing cultural and social opportunities for teenage girls that culminated in a 1963 debutante ball at the Mosque Ballroom, now part of the Altria Theater in Richmond. Audrey was also known for lending a sympathetic ear to young LGBTQ+ students who were struggling with their sexuality.

Earl Brooks, who attended Carver High before transferring to Thomas Dale High School for his senior year when desegregation allowed it, enjoyed growing up at the motel.

“I had a great time. My dad made sure I knew how to work. I made beds, I washed floors, I had my own Pepsi [vending] machine that I was responsible for,” he says.

While attending VSC, Earl fell in love with geology and decided to pursue it as a career. After obtaining a doctorate from the University of Washington, he traveled the globe mapping volcanic rocks, exploring for uranium, and undertaking other geology-related pursuits. Though retired, he’s still pursuing geoarchaeology projects in Peru and Columbia that investigate ancient gold mining.

As for his parents, they decided to sell the motel in the early 1980s and enjoyed a

happy retirement before they both passed in the early 2000s. Though Earl doesn’t remember witnessing any racial discord at the motel growing up, he says his parents probably tried to shield him from it, and that their ability to succeed in business during such a trying time is a testament to their spirit.

“It shows the hard steel of my dad from West Virginia, my mom from Pennsylvania, to put up with the crap of the times and come out [near] millionaires,” he says, noting that his parents’ combined income, investments and motel contributed to their financial success.

These days the Colbrook Motel sign sits tucked away in storage, awaiting refurbishment.

The restored sign will be front and center of a development in the works from the Better Housing Coalition. If all goes according to plan, the not-for-profit will develop the property into about 166 energy-efficient apartments for lower-income households making between 40% and 60% of the area’s median income. With a mix of one-, two- and three-bedroom units, the Colbrook development will serve individuals and families making between \$30,000 and \$55,000 a year, depending on household size. A prospective timeline would have the project finalized and begin to lease in mid-2023.

Greta Harris, president and chief executive of the BHC, says that with the local housing market continuing to boom, “folks of more modest means struggle to find quality communities at an affordable price.” As such, she says the Colbrook development is an ideal way to fulfill BHC’s mission of developing, owning and managing quality affordable housing in the region.

“It’s in our sweet spot, in that we try to create healthy, safe, affordable places for people to call home,” she says.

Early plans from architecture firm Baskervill feature a playground, a garden, a fitness center, community space and a walking trail that will commemorate the history of the site. Burt Pinnock, principal and chairman of the board at Baskervill, says that just as the Colbrook Motel gave Black motorists a safer way to travel, the development is a continuation of the objective of giving those who need it a safe place to rest their head.

“We’re trying to pay tribute to the history of this site,” Pinnock says. “Safe harbors are cool when you can find them.”

As for Earl Brooks, he’s pleased that the efforts of his parents to help others during segregation are being commemorated by the community.

“It was a tough time, and some of this stuff still hangs on,” he says. “It’s nice that people see it for what it was, and what it did for people back in the ‘50s.” ■

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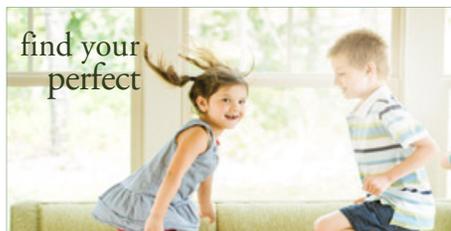
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