

Group envisions 'Little Italy' in downtown S.A.

The Christopher Columbus Italian Society unveils plans for a downtown development project during its annual Columbus Day celebration.

By Lindsay Kastner : October 10, 2010
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Alice Gennero (left) and Lisa Zottarelli prepare spaghetti and meatball plates at the Christopher Columbus Italian Society's Columbus Day celebration.

If the annual Christopher Columbus Day spaghetti and meatball dinner at Columbus Hall is your idea of San Antonio's Italian-American community at its finest, the celebration's organizers would like you to rethink that notion.

It's not that the Christopher Columbus Italian Society wants anyone to stop attending its Columbus Day fundraiser, which regularly sells several thousand home-cooked meals each year. Volunteers rolled 6,400 meatballs this year, and hungry patrons were lining up to devour them as early as 11 a.m. Sunday.

But this year, the cultural organization unveiled plans for a "Little Italy" concept it hopes will bring together the city's Italian-American community and serve as a focal point for tourists and shoppers.

"The idea is to bring the community back downtown," said Italian Society secretary Frank Monaco, who spearheaded plans for the Little Italy concept.

The plans call for developing land behind Columbus Hall to create a small, mixed-used development, reminiscent of a town in the Calabria region of Southern Italy, which once was home to many of the Italian immigrant families who moved to San Antonio.

An architect's mock-up on display during Sunday's celebration showed plans for several buildings of various shapes and sizes, all oriented toward the back of San Francesco di Paola Church, a 1920s structure adjacent to Columbus Hall.

The Society owns the land behind Columbus Hall where most of the development would take place, although plans for the project also envision some changes to the neighboring Columbus Park, such as adding a bus stop.

"We're only three blocks from the Mercado," Monaco said. "Wouldn't it be a great deal if a destination in San Antonio could be to go to the Mercado and then when you get done there go to Little Italy?"

Monaco said organizers have had preliminary conversations with the city's Parks and Recreation Department and that the concept received a favorable response.

District 1 City Councilwoman **Mary Alice Cisneros** said she was excited about the idea for a Little Italy in San Antonio.

"They own the land, the zoning is right and the timing is perfect," she said.

The group has yet to work out how it would fund the ambitious project.

"We haven't gotten that far yet," Monaco said. "We're just getting the chicken into the pot. We haven't cooked it yet."

Gia Raymond has been attending the spaghetti dinner at Columbus Hall for years. Her father was a past president of the Italian Society, and many of her relatives once lived and worked in the area around Columbus Hall and San Francesco di Paola Church.

Raymond said although someone from her family makes it to the spaghetti dinner every year, this was the first year that many family members were able to attend together. She believes if a Little Italy is created, more Italian-American families will return to the area on a consistent basis.

"Basically, by doing that, they're bringing what was here back into the present," she said.