

## Panel recommends Bahama Village improvement money

Contributed by JOHN L. GUERRA  
Sunday, 13 January 2013  
Last Updated Sunday, 13 January 2013

KEY WEST — Petronia Street, an aging AME church, an historic gymnasium and a group that renovates rundown homes in Bahama Village are about to receive some much-needed funding.

A volunteer panel of village residents approved the money for these and other projects after hearing 5-minute presentations from each applicant. The money for the projects comes from \$850,000 in 2012 property Tax Increment Financing (TIF) money, which residents in blighted neighborhoods can use to improve infrastructure and buildings in their community.

On Thursday night, the Bahama Village Redevelopment Advisory Committee approved:

- \$290,000 for the Petronia Street Connectivity Project, which will improve the commercial and residential corridor that runs from Duval Street to Front Street. The city wants to landscape the street, which will act as a thoroughfare for visitors to reach the Truman Waterfront. Improvements include new lighting, sidewalks, signage, new benches and other street furniture. The city plans to build a yacht basin, an assisted living center, a performing arts amphitheater, sports fields and other facilities at the waterfront just below Bahama Village.
- \$205,000 to continue the renovation of the Cornish African Methodist Zion Church on Whitehead Street. The congregation formed as the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1846 under a lime tree in Key West when other churches limited the number of seats for black parishioners. The present church building was begun in 1865.
- \$160,000 for an engineering study of the Frederick Douglass Gym, which was part of a segregated high school built in 1957 and now serves as an arts, music and community center and a place where kids can play indoor sports. The gym's concrete structure is cracked, and the iron rods inside the cement have rusted and expanded, causing chunks of concrete to fall from ceilings and walls, said Doug Bradshaw, the senior project engineer for the city of Key West. The money awarded Thursday night is for determining what needs to be fixed in the building. Bradshaw will look for cracks and

other faults in the gym's foundation and structure, and determine whether the building and soil around it contain asbestos, lead paint and other toxins before starting work. The gym is also to receive \$1 million from the city from the sale of the Pier House property, a hotel at the end of Simonton Street.

- \$72,000 for Habitat for Humanity, the faith-based group that renovates dilapidated homes in return for the homeowner's sweat equity. The group has renovated several homes in Bahama Village in recent years, including 209 Olivia Street and 112 Hutchison Lane. The money will allow Habitat to fix several more homes in 2013. "We will focus on refurbishing affordable housing stock for seniors," said Mark Moss, Habitat's executive director.

- \$55,000 for the Coral City Elks Club on Whitehead Street. The one-story building is in need of repair and renovation. On busy tourist weekends, Elk members fire up grills and barbecue pork and chicken in front of their club to raise money for their projects. The club also operates a bar and occasional nightclub at the site.

- The council also approved \$20,000 for a new community garden, designed to beautify a corner of the neighborhood and to provide a place for children to learn gardening and social skills. Committee member Jerry Curtis said the TIF money means a lot to Bahama Village.

"It's important that we enhance the community, it's long overdue," Curtis said after the panel approved the money. "These projects are a big part of our city's history. We've got a long way to go, but eventually we'll get there."

The money approved Thursday night is subject to approval by the Key West City Council on Jan. 23. The city usually follows the recommendations of the advisory committee, said City Commissioner Clayton Lopez, who represents Bahama Village and other neighborhoods in District 6.