

# New school could bridge gap between south OKC neighborhoods



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**The entrance to Western Gateway Elementary will face Douglas Avenue and SW 15 Street, the first connection between older working class neighborhoods to the west and the new urbanist Wheeler District emerging to the east at the old Downtown Airpark. [RENDERING BY ALLFORD HALL MONAGHAN MORRIS]**

Construction is about to start on Oklahoma City's first dual language immersion school, creating the first connection between a new urbanist community being built along the Oklahoma River and older, working class neighborhoods nearby.

Western Gateway Elementary comes out of the original vision for the Wheeler development being built at the former Downtown Airpark and is funded through a tax increment financing district. As a dual immersion school, instruction will be done in both English and Spanish. It will open for the fall 2021 school year at the site of the former Canadian Valley meat plant at SW 15 Street and Douglas Avenue in the Jones Grove neighborhood, which neighbors the Wheeler District.

The charter school will be led by Heather Zacarias, whose resume includes overseeing blending of the student body at downtown's John Rex Elementary and stints as assistant principal at Lee and Adams elementary schools in south Oklahoma City.

Western Gateway is an unprecedented effort in Oklahoma City, one that Zacarias is eager to take on.

"The school will be designed around community engagement," Zacarias said. "I've had experience working as an administrator in south Oklahoma City and felt very comfortable with blending the community with diverse social economic classes."

She sees the school as a place where students and their families will celebrate different cultures and traditions.

"It's thrilling to be able to come in at the beginning stages of this project and know we'll have a beautiful space for children to grow, thrive and learn how to make a difference in the world," she said. "This building is designed to foster creativity, ingenuity and teamwork in our students."

The school will open in phases and enroll up to 380 students, pre-K through fourth grade.

Planning for the school started five years ago when the Humphreys family, which is developing Wheeler, bought the closed, vandalized Canadian Valley plant and donated the property to the Wheeler Community Foundation that is building the school. The site was cleared two years ago.

The 36,500-square-foot school, designed by architectural firm Allford Hall Monaghan Morris is designed with an entryway that fronts Douglas Avenue, the closest street to Wheeler, and SW 15, which connects to the Jones Grove neighborhood.

The school will be built around a 6,700-square-foot internal courtyard, which creates outdoor learning spaces. A cafeteria with indoor plants is designed to act as an extension of the external courtyard, while colorful geometric patterns running through the building will link key spaces.

“Our goal has been to create a simple, flexible and timeless building full of natural light,” said Wade Scaramucci, associate director for Allford Hall Monaghan Morris. “The school was designed to enhance and embrace the early educational curriculum, providing students with varied spaces for both learning and play.”

Scaramucci said what he doesn’t want is another “lazy” school building that doesn’t meet the needs of its students, teachers and surrounding communities. In addition to serving Jones Grove, the school will serve students from the College Hill and Higgins Heights neighborhoods.

“This isn’t just a school — it’s a community center,” Scaramucci said. “It is designed to have activities after hours. In my opinion, too many schools are lazy designs, only built for daytime hours, nine months a year. The idea you can make a school that works super hard for the students and the community is a worthwhile endeavor.”

Every street that currently extends toward Wheeler dead-ends at, or west of, Douglas Avenue. Even when the school opens, the neighborhoods will access the school from two different streets that won’t connect until Wheeler, which is starting its second phase of development, proceeds to its third phase.

Ashley Terry, vice president of development at Wheeler and head of the charter school application committee for Western Gateway, said the two neighborhoods will ultimately be connected at SW 15, SW 17, and SW 18 with infrastructure to be funded through the TIF district.

The school represents the first significant investment in the Jones Grove neighborhood in decades. Just a few years ago, several of the neighborhood’s streets had never been paved or were in such disrepair they were reduced to gravel.



The 2018 U.S. Census estimates 43.4% percent of those in the older neighborhoods west of Wheeler are below the poverty line compared to the Oklahoma County rate of 12.5%. The census tract that includes Jones Grove and the adjoining older neighborhoods is about 40% Hispanic or Latino.

Jones Grove has been a working class neighborhood since it was built in the 1900s. The neighborhood early on was subject to haphazard zoning allowing industrial use, oil storage tanks and junkyards to exist amid the area's homes.

Jones Grove not only dead-ends at Wheeler, but is also cut off along all but one street from Rotary Park to the west. Other streets dead-end where the Boardman plant stood for the past century.

Will Hider, who bought a new home in Jones Grove from Neighborhood Housing Services five years ago, kept an eye on development of Wheeler and plans for the school though he never visited the new urbanist neighborhood. Hider is happy that his neighborhood's long neglected streets are being repaved and sidewalks were recently added along SW 15 leading up to the school site.

"Anything will help," Hider said.

Half of Hider's street consists of new homes built by Neighborhood Housing Services, a nonprofit organization seeking to increase affordable housing options in Oklahoma City. Despite challenges of historically bad zoning, poverty and too many dead-end streets, many of the older homes in Jones Grove are still well maintained, the lawns mowed and trash kept to a minimum.

But much more is needed, Hider said, in a neighborhood where \$25,000 homes are within walking distance of half-a-million dollar homes being built in Wheeler. In his neighborhood, stray dogs commonly roam the streets. He calls it a "is there fireworks or gunshots type of neighborhood."

Hider said he's happy the abandoned Canadian Valley meat plant is gone and he now has a church instead of a junkyard at the end of his street. He thinks the school will spur more changes in his neighborhood. But he wonders how the two vastly different communities will come together at a school where the streets don't connect and won't for at least the next couple of years.

For now, Hider and neighbors can only catch a glimpse of the Wheeler Ferris Wheel that anchors the new community where residents can walk to the new Terminal Commons restaurant and coffee shop, the soon-to-open Big Friendly brewery and tap room, and other amenities planned amid the rows of new homes.

The only commercial mixed use in Jones Grove, an old grocery store on McKinley Avenue, closed a few years ago.

“I don’t see people from Wheeler going into my neighborhood,” Hider said. “But I do see folks enrolling in the school for sure and walking to the Ferris wheel. If anything related to Wheeler and the school development helps improve anything around here it will be welcome.”