



## 4 community centers stay open

City's new partner, **Memphis Athletic Ministries**, will provide activities

By Amos Maki

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Four city community centers that were nearly closed last year due to budget concerns have new life thanks to a public-private partnership that was cemented this month. **Memphis Athletic Ministries**, a faith-based organization that uses sports to reach kids, was recently approved by the City Council to operate four inner-city community centers: Greenlaw, Simon/Boyd-Magnolia, Bethel Labelle and Hamilton.



*Bobbie Graves, 13, (from left) Apriana Golden, 9, and Detriana Golden, 11, play Mancala at the Greenlaw Community Center.*

"I think it will be good for those areas," said City Council chairman Harold Collins, a MAM board member. "Having **MAM** involved with their programming will only enhance their experiences within the community."

Last year, former Mayor Willie Herenton, citing a \$700,000 efficiency study by Deloitte Consulting LLP, proposed closing the community centers, along with five libraries, as a cost-saving measure, but the City Council appropriated \$607,703 to keep the facilities open. In March, the city issued requests for proposals to operate the community centers and **MAM**, which was founded in 1998, was chosen.

"The city sees this approach as a very positive arrangement, particularly given that these centers were identified in the efficiency study as centers that should be closed or sold by the city," said Joseph Lee III, deputy director of the Parks Division.

The agreement with the city has an initial term of two years and two, four-year options, which means the agreement could last a total of 10 years. **MAM** will staff the community centers, provide all the recreational activities and even pay the utility bills. The organization is scheduled to take over operations at the community centers by Nov. 1.

"Our general philosophy is to try to partner with people who have underutilized recreational facilities," said **Gib Vestal**, president of **MAM**. "They're providing the building, and we provide the staff and services to serve the neighborhood."

The four MAM community centers will offer a broader menu of recreational and educational opportunities -- including computer labs at each facility, lessons in manners and MAM's financial literacy program -- than what is currently offered at the city's other community centers. The four centers will be open from around 2 p.m. to 9 p.m. during the school year. During the summer, they will be open from noon to 9 p.m. They will be open year-round on Saturdays.

"Our staff members will be actively interacting with the kids," said Vestal. "Part of our strategy is to have structured activities alongside open activity."

Each facility will have a neighborhood director to oversee operations and handle community outreach programs. At Greenlaw Community Center in the Uptown area, former University of Memphis basketball star Detric Golden, founder of Golden Child Ministries, will serve as neighborhood director.

"**(MAM)** represents class and Christ, and that is why I jumped at the opportunity to work with them," said Golden. "Their name means so much in this community."

William Jones, a 14-year-old who lives across the street from Greenlaw, doesn't know much about city budgets or community center operations, but he's glad the doors of his neighborhood community center are staying open. "They help us to stay out of trouble and get good grades," he said.

To learn more about MAM, go to [mamsports.org](http://mamsports.org).