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Police station offers safe haven, city service

By Bertram Rantin

Gonzales Gardens residents have a new reason to celebrate.

Members of the Columbia housing community joined with the Columbia Police Department on Friday to officially open the city's first "koban."

"You call this a koban. I call it my refuge, my security and my place of peace," Chandra Scott, a teen-ager from the community, said during Friday's ribbon-cutting ceremonies.

The koban the Japanese term for police ministration is a partnership between the Columbia Police Department, the Columbia Housing Authority and the Columbia Urban League. It is the first of several substations planned in the community.

Police Chief Charles Austin said the opening is realization of a 5-year-old dream.

"This is tremendous opportunity for all of us to be able to make a number of services available to help the quality of life in this community." Austin said. "We will be able to do more than have a police effort."

In addition to housing police personnel, the koban will provide health care, educational and various city services.

"I really feel good about the process," Austin said.

So do area residents.

Jermiah Cain, who was at Friday's ceremonies with his 1-year-old son, Shaking, said the new facility will help make the community a better place for his child.

"I want him to grow up being around good people," Cain said. "It will help a lot of kids stay out of trouble. It gives them something to do."

Travis Hagler, an A.C. Flora High School student, said the opening of the koban has created a sense of unity in the area.

"Everyone in the community is coming together," he said.

Friday's featured speaker was Lynn Curtis, president of the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation in Washington, which provided a gift to help fund the koban.

Curtis said the center is an example of things that work, adding that too often, greater effort is given to building correctional facilities than providing alternatives for young people.

"It costs more money to go to jail than to go to Yale," Curtis said, citing the high cost of building and maintaining prisons.

Columbia Police officer Albertus Cocklin, who will be stationed at the koban, said he's excited about the potential, particularly for young people.

"We're going to be doing a lot of programs," Cocklin said.

In addition to the Gonzales Gardens site, a residential police koban will be established in the Waverly community, where three officers will work and live. It is expected to open later this summer.