

Corporate citizen

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When the sun came up Friday, the Franklin Square Boys and Girls Club was just "OK," its director says. By sunset, the West Baltimore center serving dozens of youths had been transformed into a dazzling, safari-themed world of new computers, books, games, sofas, flat-screen TVs — even an air hockey table.

Yesterday, club director Deborah Tyson still seemed dazed by the one-day overhaul carried out by 125 employees of Constellation Energy Group and its subsidiary, BGE, as part of the company's annual Extreme Makeover Challenge.

"It wouldn't have happened without them," she said, showing off room after room of upgrades. "I don't know of a club that looks this good. I am very proud and thrilled we were chosen. They are greatly appreciated here. They are our new extended family."

Now that family may be on its way out of town.

Ratings agency Standard & Poor's said Constellation was in advanced stages of sale negotiations yesterday, and if it is scooped up by an out-of-town corporation one result could be fewer such charitable projects here. Not only would Baltimore City lose its last Fortune 500 headquarters — and almost certainly some of Constellation's 6,768 jobs statewide — but also possibly the hometown ties that often deepen a company's community involvement.

Last year, the company and its employees gave \$5.1 million to United Way chapters and local charities around the world, and the company said it was the largest corporate giver to the United Way of Central Maryland.

Among its high-profile endeavors has been the annual Constellation Energy Classic golf tournament and its successor, the Constellation Senior Players Championship, which have raised \$8.5 million for charity. Employees last year gave more than 2,400 pints of blood in Central Maryland.

In the arts, Constellation contributes an annual "five-figure" gift to the Walters Art Museum and occasionally helps fund exhibitions. A longtime supporter of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, it is listed among corporations giving \$50,000 or more, and cumulatively it has given more than \$100,000 to the Baltimore Opera Company.

"These large corporations have the capacity to support a lot of local activities, whether they are golf

tournaments or the rebuilding of playgrounds or whatever," said economist Anirban Basu, chief executive of the Sage Policy Group in Baltimore. "When you lose corporations, the capacity to do those things declines in the community. A community like Baltimore has plenty of needs."

Given today's high electric rates, he said, such generous corporate giving might have another by-product: soothing ratepayers' ire somewhat.

If there is a sale, the best outcome would be for Constellation to be treated as an independent unit by a new parent, Basu said. More likely, key executive positions and decision-making would move to the buyer's home city, as happened after Maryland National Bank, Alex. Brown, USF&G and other erstwhile corporate heavyweights were bought.

Business and government officials put on brave faces while awaiting news.

"Our hope would be that, whatever the future holds for the company, that sense of corporate citizenship and the jobs stay in Baltimore," said M.J.

"Jay" Brodie, president of Baltimore Development Corp., the city's development arm.

"If and when there were a change," he added, "we would work with them to look at the downside, and potentially there would be an upside, too."

Constellation's high-rise headquarters, at 750 E. Pratt St., has had a catalytic effect on that part of downtown, with several development projects taking shape nearby in recent years.

Even if the company is sold, Constellation will remain "a major part of our community," predicted J. Thomas Sadowski, interim president of the Economic Alliance of Greater Baltimore.

"Constellation has a customer base here, a presence here," he said. "Whether or not their headquarters is here will not determine what service they're providing customers or their business interests in the region."

Donald C. Fry, president of the **Greater Baltimore Committee**, didn't even want to speculate on what impact Constellation's sale could have locally. He voiced hope that while some units might be spun off, the company itself would survive and stay.

"Whenever there is a need, whether it be philanthropic or civic, Constellation has been one of the standard bearers that you go to, and they have always been very receptive to giving back."

At the Boys and Girls Club, run by the Salvation Army, Tyson would quickly agree.

After the club on North Calhoun Street was chosen, Constellation gave eight groups of employees \$1,500 apiece and challenged them to find local businesses to donate paint, appliances and other materials. Painting was done Sept. 5, but the vast majority of the improvements came on Friday.

Tyson got so excited amid the bustle that she walked around hugging volunteers. After school, many of the 55 to 65 children for whom the center is a haven walked in wide-eyed, she said. Their first impression would have been the bright yellow wall emblazoned with images of palm trees and lions. Then they would have noticed something amazing: virtually everything at the center was brand new.

The kids asked Tyson if they could scream. She said yes, and they shouted with delight.

Baltimore Sun reporters Chris Kaltenbach, Sam Sessa, Tim Smith and Andrea Walker contributed to this article.

charitable support

Constellation Energy Group supports a variety of charities including:

- United Way
- Walters Art Museum
- Center Stage
- Baltimore Symphony Orchestra
- Baltimore Opera Company
- Community Assistance Network
- Govans Ecumenical Development Corporation
- Fuel Fund of Maryland
- St. Vincent de Paul Society
- Salvation Army
- United Communities Against Poverty
- CollegeBound Foundation
- Maryland Mentoring Partnership
- Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay
- Center for Watershed Protection
- Kennedy Krieger Institute
- Union Memorial Hospital
- Baltimore Community Foundation