

CLAREMONT PARKS & RECREATION

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CLAREMONT TO BUILD NEW COMMUNITY RECREATION CENTER;

\$3 MILLION GIFT FROM LOCAL BANK HELPS MAKE PROJECT POSSIBLE

CLAREMONT, NH--Through a combination of need, generosity, city support and a vision, exciting things in the recreation field are happening in Claremont, NH, these days. And considering the times, the economic challenge and a community working hard to forge ahead, that is no small accomplishment.

Since before 1950, recreation has played a key role in this New Hampshire community of about 13,000. Thanks to the generosity of the Bailey sisters, a community center was established and opened in 1948, designed to ensure the "moral, physical and mental welfare of all participants." A few years later, an indoor swimming pool was added, expanding the type of recreation that Claremont could offer. Later, in 1975, a gymnasium was added, creating a true complex of recreational activities. Also added to the mix in another part of town, was an outdoor pool, dedicated in 1953.

Both time and use have worn out all of the facilities, some of which are approaching 70 years in age. The Claremont Parks & Recreation Department, frequently lauded for keeping deteriorating facilities open, began working on a plan, with city support, some 10 years to consolidate the facilities into one location and under one roof, allowing them to offer more and better programming in a facility that was efficient and "green." The process began with a community-wide survey to determine just what residents wanted for programming and in a facility as well as an inventory of the conditions of all of the indoor and outdoor facilities.

Completely unexpected was the generous gift from the local bank, Claremont Savings Bank, of \$3 million to help kick off the project and the fundraising. It was clear that community support was there to make the new facility a reality. "In talking with colleagues in the recreation field and those working in the fundraising arena, most say that a contribution from an institution like what we received from Claremont Savings Bank is unheard of with projects such as ours," said Claremont Parks and Recreation Director Scott Hausler. "Contributions and commitments at this level are usually seen in large metropolitan communities for huge civic arenas and art and entertainment facilities. This simply goes to show the investment CSB is willing to make in its own community."

The city stepped up to the plate as well, adding \$1 million for design and fundraising efforts. Various sites were considered for the new facility, including existing buildings, but it wasn't until the same bank, Claremont Savings, offered to donate a tract of land across the street from the middle school that a true vision for the project began to percolate.

Next to the middle school sits the regional vocational technical center for high school- aged students, and next to that, the Arrowhead Recreation Area, an amazing in-town site providing tubing, skiing and snowboarding trails in the winter and hiking trails and picnic grounds in warm weather. Also nearby, the rails to trails routes, with the high school and a major city park, home to the town's largest athletic fields and track, down the street. The idea that building the new community recreation center across the street from so many existing academic and recreational offerings gave birth to the idea that this part of town could be turned into a campus unlike anything in the region.

Such a vision could not have been imagined in Claremont, 10, 15, or 20 years ago. Once a booming manufacturing community, Claremont was the focal point of the Connecticut River Valley, the destination town for neighboring communities in both New Hampshire and Vermont. Modern manufacturing had been the rightful heir to a long history of mills that had been built along Claremont's Sugar River in the 1800s, mills that produced cotton goods, shoes, paper and more. Then in the 1980s, manufacturing began to disappear from the country, and the valley, hitting all the local communities, including Claremont hard. Jobs disappeared, storefronts emptied and the decline settled in for the long haul.

Over time, starting in the late 1990s, a new movement was started to try to turn things around. Claremont became an award-winning Main Street Community, and began attracting new interest. Gradually, small high-tech companies started to arrive, and large box stores like Home Depot moved into town. A major project to renovate some of the old mill buildings was undertaken as well. The beautiful sites on the Sugar River drew in a mid-sized computer company, Red River, which moved its headquarters and 80 employees to Claremont, and the Common Man Restaurant and Inn, with locations in several areas of the state, opened for business as well. Currently, CVS is opening a brand new store, and Tractor Supply Company is building the first phase of a new complex. Faith in the community as a good place to do business is returning.

With the economy crashing as it has in the last several years, fundraising for the new community recreation center was slowed, affecting the progress of the \$9 million project. Yet, the existing facilities in town continued to deteriorate. It was clear that the decision about what to do regarding recreational programming in Claremont came down to this: pour millions into aging buildings where there would still be inadequate parking and limited programming or put the money committed, plus a few million more, into a brand new facility that would serve the community for decades to come. Understanding that a community that puts an emphasis on healthy living, in which recreation can play a major role, is a forward-looking community and that

such a facility could serve as a valuable marketing and economic tool to attract new business and residents, Claremont City Manager Guy Santagate and the city council decided to hold a series of public hearings on the project to determine if there was enough community support to bond, at historically-low rates, for the remainder of funding that was needed to round out the \$3 million bank donation, \$1 million from the city and some \$681,000 raised through donations. While a number of residents were opposed, the project received substantial support, and the bonding passed. Significant support came from the local hospital, Valley Regional Hospital, whose CEO Claire Bowen stated, "A potential collaboration with the community center opens an exciting door to many wellness prevention opportunities. Whether it's instilling healthy eating habits in children attending afterschool programs, empowering families to engage in recreation activities, or guiding our elderly population through safe and rejuvenating pool exercises ... all has been proven to enhance the wellbeing of our neighbors, friends and families.

"As President and CEO of Valley Regional Hospital, it is with enthusiasm that we support the mission and efforts to create a home for recreation, education and fun ... and most importantly, for building a healthy community."

Come this spring, groundbreaking is expected to take place for the 50,000-square-foot recreation community center. Plans call for a larger pool, with a smaller therapeutic or lesson pool; BB court that could double as two separate sport courts(i.e. volleyball/basketball half courts); combined portable seating for large functions; elevated walking/jogging track; cardio fitness area; multi-function community room or classroom; teen room; and locker rooms and family changing areas. In New Hampshire, where winters are long and reduce the amount of outdoor recreation time residents can have, such a facility will go a long ways in providing year-round fun and exercise. And its cost recovery is expected to far surpass what the department is able to recover with its current facilities.

"We're looking forward to being able to host winter swim meets and many different types of competitions, community events and programs that we can't do now," said Hausler. The pool will go from four lanes to eight lanes, "and we'll be able to offer a multipurpose gymnasium, elevated walking/jogging track, cardiovascular and strength equipment, community function rooms, teen/game room and youth fitness opportunities. The possibilities are endless."