

## PZC to review charter school plan

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WILLIMANTIC — The old YMCA space on Main Street will soon be transformed into a brand-new charter high school, and the look and functionality of the renovated space will be the topic of a site plan review later this week.

The planning and zoning commission Thursday will hold a site plan review at 7 p.m. in Windham Town Hall to discuss the construction plans which Hartfordbased nonprofit Our Piece of the Pie (OPP) hopes to execute over the next 10 months or so.

“We’ve got to have students in the building on the first of August,” said OPP President and Chief Executive Officer Bob Rath.

If and when the plans are approved by the PZC, either on Thursday or some later date, the building construction will begin promptly.

“It’s going to start pretty promptly,” Rath said. “Everything is happening at once, because it’s the only way to get this project done.”

Significantly for locals, plans include the restoration of both original facades for the two interconnected buildings that long served as the YMCA space.

“It’s a good-looking plan,” said Windham Zoning Enforcement Officer Matthew Vertefeuille, who has been working with OPP as it prepares for the project.

The planning and zoning review will come not a moment too soon.

“Their goal is to start construction in the next 30 days,” Vertefeuille said.

Path Academy, designed as a charter school for overage, under-credited high school students in the Windham region, was officially approved by the state Board of Education in June and is scheduled to open in August 2014.

It will open at 832 Main St., which was donated by the local DeVivo family to OPP in July, and which includes roughly 28,000 square feet and three above-ground stories.

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The school will provide up to 200 overage, under-credited Windham and area students with academic and developmental supports aimed to graduate the students from high school and propel them toward post-secondary educational or workplace success.

OPP already runs other programs, including Opportunity High School in Hartford, which provides similar supports to young people ages 14 to 24.

The organization had previously been hoping to establish the school in the old cinema building at Jillson Square, but when OPP learned of the YMCA building opportunity, it perceived that property as a better option.

The property consists of two distinct but interconnected buildings that are both hidden behind a single 1962-era YMCA façade.

“(OPP is) going back to the original double façade, so it’s going to look like two buildings,” Vertefeuille said.

Although the group had at one time expressed some concern about cost for the façade renovation, Vertefeuille said OPP then found a way to make it work.

“They heard loud and clear that this was something we were interested in,” he said. Indeed, said Windham Mayor Ernest Eldridge, that area of downtown Main Street is in need of some revitalization, and a newold façade will be a boon for the town.

“That center section (of Main Street) has always been kind of a sore spot,” he said, “and I think it will tie everything together. I’m really looking forward to that.”

Eldridge hopes the Path Academy renovation will inspire owners of other buildings in that area “to say, ‘Gee, we can do better, too.’” The site plan review Thursday will enable planning and zoning commissioners to ask questions and provide feedback on OPP’s site plan.

Vertefeuille said considerations will include “everything from where they’re going to have garbage, where they’re going to drop off students, where they’re going to park cars, the lighting, landscaping. ... It will include all the drawings.”

As it is not a public hearing, there will likely be no opportunity for citizen comment.

During the meeting, commissioners can request changes to the site plan.

“I’ve got some questions and concerns and that will all come out at the meeting on Thursday, but I don’t see anything that will hold the process up,” Vertefeuille said. “I’ll be happy to see one less vacant building on Main Street.”

*To view OPP’s renderings of the proposed work, visit the code enforcement office at Windham Town Hall, 979 Main St., Willimantic.*