

Renovations coming along at Windham Path Academy

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WILLIMANTIC — Construction on the Windham Path Academy on Main Street is well under way and on schedule.

After being approved by the state Board of Education in June 2013 the school, targeting over-aged, undercredited students ages 15 through 20, is set to open its doors Aug. 18.

Its enrollment is already at 50 percent capacity and still taking applications.

Meanwhile construction workers have been hard at it, renovating the old YMCA building and the adjacent Gem Theater into one space to house the 220 students it hopes to provide educational services for.

The facility is to be operated by the Hartford-based nonprofit Our Piece of the Pie organization that also offers a program in Bloomfield, which has been in existence for 37 years.

In the first year, the Willimantic program will accept 125 students.

A tour open to the public Monday demonstrated just how far along the renovations, which emphasize security and accessibility, are coming along.

First built in 1912, the building has now been closed for more than two decades, but its reconstruction includes maintaining or refurbishing the historical aspects of the building, including the façade.

Inside, it is outfitted with state-of-the-art security and all of the technological facilities students need to achieve to their best potential.

“Post-Sandy Hook (security) matters,” said Chris **(Renovations, Page 4)**



Construction on the new Windham Path Academy on Main Street in Willimantic is currently on schedule. ABOVE: A construction worker works in a hallway near the main entrance of the school. RIGHT: Some of the architectural features and signage of the old YMCA is being showcased through the renovations, like the original painted brick sign in the gym.

Roxanne Pandolfi photos

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Leoni, chief academic officer for Our Piece of the Pie.

To that end, there are 45 cameras being installed throughout the school with buzz-in entrances to the building.

In addition to being ADA accessible, there will also be provisions for students who may be homeless, including a shower in the nurse's office.

Each student will have his or her own computer station and work area throughout the four levels of the building, which are being designed in such a way that newcomers would be housed on the lowest level and work their way up, both academically and location wise.

"We want students to feel that they are moving up," said Brooke Lafreniere, the school's principal.

While the per-student funding comes primarily from the state, the allotted \$11,000 each won't be enough to cover all the costs, according to Leoni.

It is not yet determined if there will be a per-student cost to sending school districts, although the districts are required by state law to provide transportation.

"No one in the state is educating a student for \$11,000," Leoni said.

Be that as it may, critical components are in place to make sure each of the students has the opportunity to reach his or her full potential as well as their personal goals. Those goals will be reached with a combination of teachertaugth course work and online learning.

While the desired outcome is that every student will leave with a diploma in their hands, time factors might make that difficult for some. That said, those who fall into that category will still have the option of re-acclimating themselves to the educational environment which could pave the way toward a GED or prepare them for taking SATs necessary to get them into some secondaryeducation programs.

The school is a student-focused program, but the building is also designed in a way to welcome in the community with the addition of a "gymatorium," where physical education needs can be met but where other events can also take place.

"The community can really utilize this space as well, which is really important to us," said Lafreniere. She said she is very excited about the opportunity to work with the targeted population. "It's important for students to understand the community they are a part of and give back."

Lafreniere comes to the school from Enfield where she worked as a teacher and said she welcomes the chance to work with struggling students.

"As a teacher I always felt drawn to the students who needed me the most," Lafreniere said.

Construction costs are estimated at about \$6.1 million, not including equipment.

The state's Historic Preservation Commission has also committed up to \$1.4 million as part of a state goal to encourage the redevelopment of historic buildings.

The state also granted the program a certain number of tax credits, which were then sold to Connecticut Light and Power in order to get funds for construction.

Windham, in turn, has been working closely with every aspect of the project in a timely and efficient manner when it comes to code enforcement and other town obligations.

"The town's been great," said Bob Rath, president and chief executive officer of OPP.

Concerns about asbestos in the building have been mitigated with each piece of brick and mortar being fully tested.

"This building is fully clean," Leoni said.

Clean and, when all is said and done, green. Plans for a roof garden are also in the works.

An option that might be considered for the future is child care, which some potential students have already expressed interest in.

"It's important to me that we make school convenient," Lafreniere said.

There will also be youth development specialists on site who will serve essentially as guidance counselors but will each be assigned to individual students to help meet their specific needs and reach their goals. They will also work with student's families. There will also be bilingual staff on site.

"They bridge the gap between home life and school life," Lafreniere said. "A huge indicator of student success is how involved their families are."

The school is also looking for professional volunteers from the community who can share their knowledge and expertise with students in respect to extracurricular classes such as nutrition, governance, community gardening, writing, music and art.

With final hiring under way and all the pieces coming together, Lafreniere can't wait until the first students arrive.

"It's excellent. It's exciting. It's an amazing new opportunity," she said.

Anyone interested in applying can visit windhampathacademy.org.



LEFT: The original windows are on the floor next to the replacements during a tour of the Windham Path Academy in Willimantic on Monday. RIGHT: Progress is being made in the old gymnasium.

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