

New YMCA planned for Council Bluffs

By Mike Brownlee

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A new YMCA is planned for Council Bluffs, thanks to a joint \$7 million grant from the Iowa West Foundation and the Charles E. Lakin Foundation.

The organizations announced the gift at a meeting Thursday morning in Council Bluffs, with leaders of both all smiles when discussing their role in improving health and fitness in the city.

“I like good causes like this. My primary cause is to help young folks, to help them become good citizens,” Charles Lakin said. “We’re happy with this Y coming, it’ll be a great benefit, not only to young people but the whole community.”

The gift, \$3.5 million from each party, will be the catalyst for a \$16 million facility to be located west of Alegent Creighton Health Mercy Hospital on Kanessville Boulevard. The new facility is slated to open in early fall of 2015.

“It’s a long time coming. Council Bluffs deserves a state of the art Y that serves the entire breadth of the community,” YMCA of Greater Omaha CEO and President Len Romano said.

The Lakin donation is the latest of many from the Emerson native and Omaha resident, with the \$12 million his foundation gave to create the Charles E. Lakin Human Services Campus the largest. Iowa West provided \$8 million for the human services campus that stretches along North 16th Street between Avenue G and Avenue J. Lakin gifted \$1.2 million to Habitat for Humanity of Council Bluffs for its ReStore facility, which Iowa West kicked \$500,000 toward.

Pete Tulipana, president and CEO of the Iowa West Foundation, stressed the importance of partnerships in philanthropic endeavors, calling them, “critical for success.”

“This one felt like the right opportunity,” to work with Lakin, he said. “Kids and family, the things he cares about. It’s an exciting day for us.”

The YMCA of Greater Omaha has 10 metro area locations, including the current Council Bluffs center near Fourth Street and West Broadway. That facility has more than 100,000 visitors annually, which will expand with the new 73,000-square-foot facility, Romano said.

The Charles E. Lakin YMCA will feature two levels and include a variety of areas, including: sports courts, exercise rooms, wellness classrooms, a teen center, therapy and lap pools, an indoor track, an



NORTH EAST CORNER

Bluffs YMCA

outdoor water spray garden for kids, preschool and a playground.

In a 2011 recreation and leisure assessment in Pottawattamie County, funded in part by Iowa West, citizens noted a lack of indoor recreation facilities in the area, which Tulipana said made his organization's decision to become involved an easy one. Several years ago the YMCA approached Iowa West about funding for a new facility.

"We have a very old, relatively poorly-designed and crowded Y," Tulipana said. "We're responding to a need in the community."

With the new location, the YMCA plans to serve a broader age range and more families in Council Bluffs, while also expanding its medical-based wellness programs, which currently help members with diabetes and who've survived cancer.

"It's more than just the bricks and mortar, it's not about the building," said Romano, who took over the greater Omaha area two years ago. "It's about what will happen for people inside."

Romano talked about the idea of a "third place."

"There's home, then work or school. We want the Y to be another place to go for a sense of community," he said. "Meet new friends, volunteer, give back to the community. We want people in Council Bluffs to have a third place."

The Alegent Little Blessings Daycare currently on the proposed site of the YMCA will be incorporated into the organization's early childhood learning program, Romano said. The parties are still working on a name.

Romano said the Y would meet with both Mercy and Methodist Jennie Edmundson Hospital to discuss partnerships in care provided.

"Right now there's nothing firm in place," he said. "We'll do whatever we can to work with both systems to help them serve the community."

The \$7 million from Lakin and Iowa West is what the parties referred to as a "lead gift," with fundraising work left to be done. Romano said he hopes the Omaha community will buy in to the project, with the organization looking to raise \$3 million from foundations and donors in the city.

The YMCA hopes to raise another \$2 million in Council Bluffs, with Omaha-based developer S2W financing the remaining \$4 million.

Romano explained the details of an arrangement with Alegent Creighton Health Mercy Hospital.

The YMCA has a 99-year lease on the land for the new building, with particulars, including yearly payment, to be finalized, Romano said. S2W will develop and construct the facility on a 15-year lease. The YMCA will own the building at the end of the lease with S2W.

The YMCA has assembled a capital committee to begin fundraising, a process Romano ballparked would take a year, with another year for construction. The organization plans to sell the existing YMCA to help cover the cost of the new one, with Romano assuring members there would be no interruption in access once the building's sold.

“There would be a transition, a time period between the sale and the buyer taking over, with no gap in service,” he said.

Lakin pointed out that youth from the Boys & Girls Club, housed at the campus that bears his name, will have free memberships to the Y as part of the donation agreement. During Thursday's meeting the 92-year-old spoke glowingly about the work at the club, along with the countless good works at schools and in youth organizations in southwest Iowa.

The philanthropist said he looks forward to further grants that will benefit Council Bluffs and all of southwest Iowa.

“We're not done yet, we're not done yet,” he said, repeating himself. “And things like (the YMCA) are at the top of my list.”