

The Rush County REC Center coming in 2024

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(photo Cassie Garrett)

By **CASSIE GARRETT**



On Thursday, Sept. 7, local, regional and state representatives, along with several Rush County community members, gathered for the groundbreaking ceremony for the new community center project to be housed in the 50,000-square-foot former Walmart that closed in 2018.

"The word of the day today is community," said Rush County Economic Development Director and REC Center Chairman John McCane as the ceremony began. "Today, you are going to hear community center, community foundation, community assistance, economic and community development, community action programming. So today is about community, and as I look out here, it is very meaningful to see the community here today."

The multi-purpose community center will become the new home of the expanded Rushville Public Library, the Rush County Senior Center, the Rush County Community Assistance Food Pantry, ICAP, and other regional social services, making it an all-in-one resource for many of the community's needs. It will house a fitness center, basketball court, walking/running track, indoor pool, and daycare center. Formal and informal meeting and gathering spaces will be for the community's use.

"I remember feeling a sense of excitement when the library board first began the talks about moving to the new location," said Anna Jo Richards on behalf of the Rushville Public Library. "My first thought as a special education teacher was that all people in the community would have access to all parts of the library. Young families with strollers would be able to wheel directly into the children's room. A teenager recently injured in a sport and on

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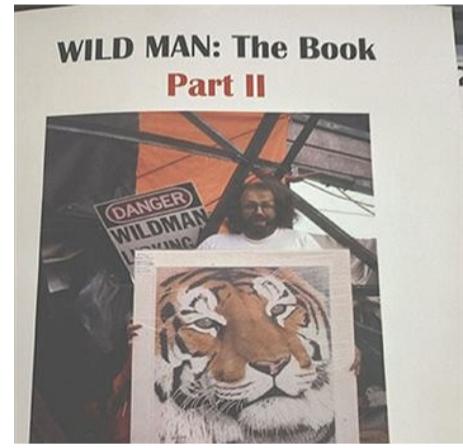
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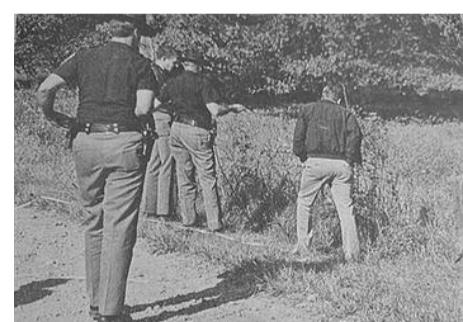
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crutches wouldn't have to worry about the steps to the teen loft. An adult in a wheelchair would be able to go directly to the adult fiction section in the library without any assistance needed."

Gleaners Food Bank was one of several funders who put their full support behind the community center.

"When it came to the Rush County REC center, we were all in," said Fred Glass, president and CEO of Gleaners. "The grant that we made was the largest that Gleaner's has made in the history of the organization, and that's because collectively, you all had your act together. The collaboration this reflects is really amazing and made this magnificent facility a reality and will dramatically improve the quality of life for everyone here in Rushville and Rush County."

The Rush County REC Center project has been discussed for decades by community visionaries working towards a common goal they believed would help transform the community. In late 2020, new life was breathed into the collective idea when the Rush County Community Foundation (RCCF) received a Large-Scale Community Leadership Grant of \$5 million.

"Rush County was the only community to receive a full and maximum \$5 million gift from the Lilly Endowment," RCCF Director Chris May said. "They saw something from the outside that we knew from inside Rush County how much this was needed and the impact it would make.

The generosity of Lilly Endowment has served as a catalyst to bring together years of local dreams and planning for the benefit of the county and the region. The commencement of this redevelopment, renovation, and new construction will do just that."

The REC center will offer something for everyone, from infants to seniors, and the benefits of the REC center are multifaceted. It will serve as a coordinated hub for social service providers. The Rush County Community Assistance food pantry will have a larger, more welcoming space with a teaching kitchen. There will be offices for WIC (Women Infants and Children), ICAP (Interlocal Community Action Program), and Firefly Children & Family Alliance.

The amenities offered will help retain and attract residents and fill a gap for affordable, high-quality childcare. The pool and fitness programs will improve overall health.

County Councilman Bob Bridges shared his enthusiasm for the project.

"This has been a long time coming. As Rushville graduates, we (Bridges and his wife) continued our careers and went to school out of town, then came back and made the decision to raise our family here. It's always been a vision of mine before I got involved

in the council to have a facility as such. Seeing it all come together, it's one of those where it's personal, you're passionate about it, but then also it's the best decision for everyone in the county."

McCane described his goal as finding the necessary funding to build the new facility with little to no debt service to the local taxpayers. McCane stated that on Dec. 1, 2020, the project didn't have a penny donated to the cause. Since then, the \$20 million for the construction is in the bank, including only 10% of taxpayer debt service.

"With construction costs realized, our next huge task is to work towards the long-term perpetuity of the REC Center," said McCane. "We all realize the importance of continuing costs beyond construction and renovation. Our county is fortunate that Wilma Jo Kile established the Ebert H. and Bessie M. Schroeder Fund at RCCF, which will help to support the sustainability of the REC Center."

Other funders include the State of Indiana's READI initiative received through the Accelerate Rural Indiana regional coalition, Redevelopment Tax Credits issued by the State of Indiana, Rushville Public Library, City of Rushville, Rush County, Diamond Pet Foods, Gleaners Food Bank, the Herdrich Family and the Buchanan Family Foundation.

McCane also announced that Rush Memorial Hospital (RMH) has become one of the major naming partners for the REC Center. RMH Steering Committee member Gerald Mohr said he believes the possibilities will be limited only by imagination.

"The community dreamed they needed a community center," said Mayor Mike Pavey. "They never wavered from the community center, and there were times when I will honestly tell you that it had kind of pushed to the back of my mind. But, every time we said we would do a study about where we go in the future, the community came back and asked where is the community center. The community has kept it alive, and I believe it's because they felt it is the gap needed to fill to provide quality of life and quality of place."