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No YMCA at the community center

Stratham site being considered

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EXETER — The Squamscott Community Commons, a nonprofit community center originally proposed to house a full-facility YMCA and local service agencies at the old high school "annex" on Linden Street, will not include a YMCA.

In addition, organizers are instead scouting out the possibility of using the site of the former Great Bay Community College on Route 33 across from Stratham Hill Park.

On May 14, the SCC board of directors unanimously voted to dissolve its relationship with Southern District YMCA/Camp Lincoln after representatives were unable to reach a consensus on fund-raising and organizational priorities.

As the center is envisioned as a collaborative effort, combining the services of local agencies to create a community focal point for residents of all ages and economic levels, Kristi Scarpone, campaign manager for SCC, said during negotiations there was a divide as to accomplishing a unified strategy for fund-raising and maintaining equality among all partners.

The agencies involved in the project include SeaCare Health Services, Exeter Center for Creative Arts, Richie McFarland Children's Center, Great Bay Kids Company and Rockingham Community Action.

"The decision to dissolve came about as there are some definite different views of the leadership in the campaign and in the project itself and the scope and the size of the project," said Terry Sullivan, chairman of the board of directors of Southern District YMCA.

"The way YMCA runs and organizes a capital needs campaign and the way another nonprofit, in this case SCC, does it are different on how you raise money and who it's earmarked to."

Traditionally, if YMCA aims to build a new facility the organization would go to the community at large and raise the money for the building. Once the building was completed the capital campaign would be over and the YMCA would be the owners and occupiers of the building and run the programs, Sullivan said.

Carol Aten, former executive director of SCC, said the cultural differences between the two groups were perhaps the greatest reason she stepped down from the position two years ago.

"That cultural difference between SCC and SDYMCA was insurmountable from a business perspective and as long as SCC tried to forge a partnership with SDYMCA I didn't believe there was ever going to be any real progress made," she said.

In moving forward and looking for a replacement to the YMCA, Scarpone said finding an organization to work with the fellow agencies in a fully collaborative manner would be crucial.

"Recreation has always been a big grounding factor for the other agencies," Scarpone said, "and providing affordable recreation opportunities for users of the other agency services has always been key in moving forward to achieve a collaborative development. We're confident we have all the social services and arts components covered and we're excited to move forward and find the most suitable recreation partner to allow for that."

Aside from the departure of the YMCA, the project may also be experiencing a change in venue in an effort to reduce the overall cost, which has been estimated at \$16 million.

In October SCC was approached by the developers of the former Great Bay Community College site in Stratham with an opportunity to potentially occupy space within that building.

Scarpone said the group began investigating whether its core mission would be supported there, whether the location would be as good or perhaps better for providing services to the Seacoast, and would it be economically beneficial to move there.

While the Linden Street site would require re-using parts of the building while demolishing and rebuilding others, the Stratham building would be retrofitted and potentially more cost-effective.

"With the Stratham site, when we took out architectural plans and laid them on top of the actual building there now the footprint was the same. So in terms of the amount of work that would need to be done for our space appears to be less," said Carter Siegel, chief volunteer fund-raiser for SCC.

"We really feel it's our fiduciary responsibility to look at all of the options and so our decision as to where we plan to go and what we plan to do really depends on financially what's best for Squamscott," Siegel said. "Stratham is definitely an option but we're not looking at it as the option."

"I think we have a chance at the Linden Street site to significantly reduce the original price tag and not compromise on programming, our overall mission and still provide truly affordable recreation for the Seacoast," Siegel said.

"We're certainly looking into the Stratham option but really our intentions are to move forward with the Exeter location," said Scarpone.

Should the center relocate to Stratham, Scarpone said there is a potential of the Seacoast YMCA to occupy the space as well.

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Scarpone said within the next 60 to 90 days SCC organizers will make a decision as to which site they will develop and move forward soon after.

"Our intention is not to have this hang out there for years but rather months," Scarpone said. "This comes down to striking a balance between how we are responsible with donor dollars, how far we go with the due diligence in making the project cost effective while meeting the needs of the community, and how long do we appear to be stalled?"

"Once we very carefully and fully vet where we need to be we can get started as we have the funds to start showing some measurable progress to the community," Siegel said.

The fund-raising efforts of the group, which have been put off since July of last year, have amounted to \$4.4 million coming from a small group of key stakeholders.

Scarpone said fund-raising efforts were not a possibility without a clear plan or direction.

The group is also able to utilize \$1 million in state funding through the 2010 Transportation, Housing and Urban Development appropriations bill, which was approved by President Barack Obama in December.

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