

'Da Vinci Code' author donates \$1 million for Exeter center

◆ **'Green' building:** The environmentally friendly community center will offer a gym and pools

By **TOBY HENRY**
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EXETER — An ambitious plan to build an environmentally friendly, multi-generational community center at the site of the Exeter Area Junior High building got a major boost with the announcement that author Dan Brown has donated \$1 million to the effort.

Carol Walker Aten, executive director of the Squamscott Community Commons nonprofit group, said the donation from the famed novelist who penned the 2005 best-seller "The Da Vinci Code" was an-

nounced Thursday night. When complete in mid-2009, Aten said the 80,000-square-foot center will have a full gymnasium, two swimming pools and programming space for a half-dozen nonprofit groups serving thousands of families in the Exeter area.

"It's a great boost for us, and not just financially," she said yesterday. "There were many people in the area who hadn't heard of our project before, but they know about it now. This really helps us move forward."

Aten said the 42-year-old Brown made his donation several months ago, but the an-

nouncement was held until Thursday night in order for the release to coincide with the first release of an artist's sketches of the community center.

"I'm excited about the prospect of this important new addition to our community," Brown said in a press release. "The Commons' impact on public health and wellness will span every economic and social boundary."

Ultimately, the community center will provide a centralized location for a number of community groups, including the Exeter Center for the Creative Arts, a food pantry, Seacare Health Services and The Southern District YMCA, Aten said. Although she declined to give the

exact amount of money raised, she said Brown's donation will join some funds that have already been raised for the facility, which is expected to cost "in the teens of millions" of dollars to complete.

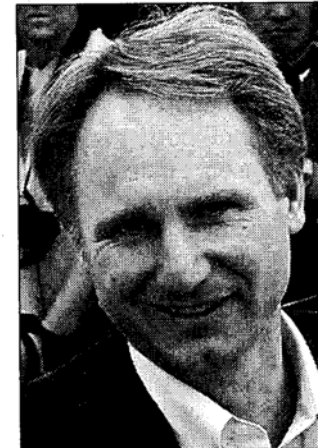
As of today, programs overseen by Squamscott and its associated non-profits provide services for more than 55,000 people in the Exeter area, and heads of local non-profits say Brown's donation will help expand their outreach once the center is built.

"A big part of what we do is health-oriented, and it will be a great opportunity for children and families to have a facility with a pool, a gym, a wellness center and exercise equipment,"

said Southern District YMCA executive director Rob McGregor. McGregor said he expects the new facility will help bring in almost 10,000 people to take part in YMCA programs.

Aten said the formal application for the project is expected to go before town officials this summer, and the non-profit group will be finalizing the \$440,000 purchase of the school building and land this summer.

The Exeter Area Junior High building will be "recycled" as much as possible, with copper piping, bricks and other materials destined for re-use, Aten said. She added that the Squamscott Community Commons is designed to be a "green" building and will rely on solar energy or



Author Dan Brown gets generous in Exeter.

some other renewable power source.