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RiverWoods gala aids Squamscott Community Commons

Proceeds go to community center

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Made-to-order stir fry dishes are prepared for residents and guests of a RiverWoods at Exeter gala evening fund-raiser Saturday, Oct. 4 to benefit the Squamscott Community Commons. John Carden photo

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EXETER — The inside of RiverWoods at Exeter was the setting of an elegant evening of fine food and fund raising Saturday, Oct. 4, as a record crowd turned out for a gala evening to benefit the Squamscott Community Commons community center project.

The largest crowd ever to attend a benefit event at RiverWoods dined on sushi, beef tenderloin and gourmet salads as guests perused tables with more than 160 silent auction items Saturday night. A grand total of the money raised had not been finalized by press time, but RiverWoods Vice President of Marketing Cathleen Toomey called the benefit a success.

Laura Skaal, a volunteer on the communications committee for Squamscott Community Commons, was impressed by the outpouring of supporters at the benefit. "A lot of it has to do with the fact that it benefits

something that touches everyone in the community from young to old," Skaal said. "It's more than just a building; it's something that's going to change the emotional landscape of the community."

Squamscott Community Commons, a new 80,000-square-foot community center — housing six nonprofit agencies and full-service YMCA — is expected to be built on Linden Street on the site of the former Exeter Area Junior High School.

RiverWoods, a retirement community off Route 111, has a history of raising funds for local community organizations, said Penny Teodorczyk, an employee at RiverWoods who served as chairwoman of the event. "This is our sixth auction and we felt like we wanted to make a larger impact in the community," Teodorczyk said, adding the auction has previously raised funds for the New Outlook Teen Center and Seacoast Hospice.

More than 30 residents at RiverWoods donated art for the benefit auction and a number of residents helped with planning the event.

"They're glad to help out where they can and it always feels good to give back," Teodorczyk said.

Some residents even took on a special role during the event, like 89-year-old Ken Cooper, an accomplished pianist, who played an array of musical numbers for guests as they mingled.

Sal and Betty Guidice, who are residents of the Ridge at RiverWoods, had their eyes on some original paintings up for auction. Sal Guidice, 85, said he was impressed by the enthusiasm of the people who helped to organize the night. "I think this is one of the better parties I've seen in Exeter," Guidice said. "The other thing we found very delightful is the number of friends from around town who are here supporting this effort, because this is terribly important to our community to have this (community center)."

Dr. Thomas Wharton, a cardiologist from Exeter Hospital, was bidding on a bicycle, juicer and stained glass piece. In addition to supporting the community center initiative, Wharton said he supports the mission of RiverWoods. "I'm very impressed with this whole organization and how it provides a place for these vital, intelligent, engaged elderly people who can pursue an excellent quality of life and keep their minds active," Wharton said.

Susan and Andre Baillargeon, of Exeter, were doing some early Christmas shopping at the silent auction and were in a heated bidding war to go home with a stained glass loon. They also had their eye on a pen-and-ink drawing by local artist Bill Childs. In addition to helping with a local cause, the couple said they were enjoying the wide array of food at the event.

Daniel Jones, an Exeter attorney, said he has attended all of the prior gala benefits, as his mother-in-law lives at RiverWoods. "RiverWoods has done a very good job supporting various organizations," Jones said. "The Squamscott Community Commons sounds like a very interesting proposal."

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