

## **Blandin Foundation releases \$400,000 grant for Walker Area Community Center**

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Mitch Loomis had great news to announce Jan. 18 at the monthly Walker Area Partners meeting. The Blandin Foundation of Grand Rapids has agreed to release \$400,000 promised to the Walker Area Community Center (WACC), which means the long-awaited project will soon begin. Loomis said WACC supporters were optimistic after meeting last week with Blandin. At that time, they presented an in-depth, overall plan for bank loans and other financing, construction plans and first-year operational costs.

WACC has now signed a contract with an architect, and construction plans are being drawn up. Bids should go out in February or March.

The center will provide a home for the Boys & Girls Clubs of America's Walker unit, Leech Lake Hockey Association, curling bonspiels, fitness center with gym and walking track, several meeting rooms, community spaces and room to hold conventions, trade shows and other activities.

Construction costs are estimated at \$2.66 million, with a \$3 million total for the project, including first year operating costs.

WACC has \$800,000 in cash on hand and several times that amount in pledges. The Blandin Foundation promised to commit \$400,000, once WACC had raised additional funding to ensure the project would go through.

Loomis estimated it will take at least a year from the time bids are awarded until the project is completed.

"There's lots of exciting things happening in the Leech Lake area," WAP chair John Fjelstul declared.

### **Critical Access Hospital update**

John Warren, Critical Access Hospital Task Force chair, summarized efforts to create a health care campus at Ah-Gwah-Ching (AGC) the state nursing home that will close by Jan. 1, 2007.

Although a 25-bed critical care hospital there is still a possibility, the task force learned that a federal rule waiver would be needed. The rule states that, to get critical care status — and thus higher Medicare and Medicaid reimbursement rates — a critical care hospital must be at least 35 miles from the next hospital.

Benedictine Health Service (BHS) of Duluth, the lead provider for the project, has determined that without that designation, a critical care hospital cannot be profitable, no matter where it is located in central Cass County.

"No matter how we stretch it, Warren said, "AGC is 28.5 miles from Park Rapids."

The group will ask Rep. Jim Oberstar to help them seek the waiver, even though "it's a long shot."

Warren said the task force also will continue working to acquire the AGC campus. "BHS feels it would be a shame to walk away from it when we can get \$4 million from the state to redevelop it."

Currently the task force has proposed a three-phase plan for using the AGC site — a long-term care facility with independent living, assisted living and nursing care options; a medical clinic that could be shared by all community health providers; then possibly a critical care hospital. All this may take 10 years to complete.

If a critical care hospital at AGC isn't fiscally feasible, the task force would look for a site on the Highway 371 corridor that meets the 35-mile requirement.

By year's end, the task force hopes the state will "turn over the keys to AGC to the community."

In addition to the 35-mile waiver, the task force and local state legislators are working on two other initiatives: to seek a state exemption to a hospital bed moratorium for up to 25 hospital beds; and to ask

for an additional \$3.1 million in bonding for city water and sewer hookups.

#### Design Team follow-up visit

Fjelstul announced that five or six members of the Minnesota Design Team (MDT), will make a follow-up visit to Walker during Eelpout Festival.

WAP and MDT members will meet Feb. 11 from 10 a.m. to noon at the WHA High School Media Room. WAP will update the Design Team on what has been accomplished since their three-day visit to the area last June. After that the Design Team will respond and make some suggestions.

Fjelstul said that some team members may take the Polar Plunge into Leech Lake to raise funds for the community center.

#### Media report

Nancy Ramp distributed copies of WAP's first newsletter. The media committee plans to keep the community updated on what WAP is doing through the twice-yearly newsletter and an annual meeting. Pam Worth is creating a Powerpoint presentation that can be presented to organizations that want to learn more about WAP.

#### Next WAP meeting

The next WAP meeting is noon Feb. 22 at Hope Lutheran Church; lunch will be served.

An annual report with plans for 2006 will be presented. Jim Lohr of the Walker Area Foundation also has been invited to explain that group's mission.