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Granger church develops education center

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SOUTH BEND -- By the time school starts in mid-August, a once-drab strip of storefronts -- brightened only by a mural dedicated to migrant farmworkers -- will reopen as a new center for learning.

That's the goal.

Leaders of Granger Community Church, with 7,000 members, say it's prime real estate: at Western Avenue and Taylor Street, across the street from the largest mass of public housing in the city.



A new facade is in the works for the Monroe Circle Community Center at Western Avenue and Taylor Street, South Bend, where Granger Community Church is renovating these old storefronts.

Tribune Photo/MARCUS MARTER

"This is a place of nourishment, not just for the soul but for the body," said the megachurch's pastor, the Rev. Mark Beeson, standing inside the unfinished work of renovating the early-1900s stores.

It once housed Ko-op 65, a food pantry for senior citizens. Sweet Home Baptist Church ran a sparse, seldom-

visited five-and-dime store, too.

The church has gutted all that, and with the help of a \$750,000 capital

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campaign, is turning it into Monroe Circle Community Center.

It will offer an alternative school, after-school tutoring and mentoring, GED classes and life-skills training and a food pantry.

On Monday, the South Bend Common Council voted to approve \$50,000 in federal Community Development Block Grant money for the project, which was part of a larger appropriation.

The city also is providing another \$50,000 from the Western Avenue Commercial Corridor initiative, Mayor Stephen J. Luecke said.

Both grants are from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Of that, about \$35,000 will be used to acquire the former Dee-Kens lounge and liquor store at the eastern end of the building, said Dan Blacketor, a volunteer who is president of EnterMission, a nonprofit group the church started to raise project funds.

The old liquor store will become a vocational and art center, opening in spring 2008, Blacketor said.

In all, the building will be worth about \$1 million, but only about half of that will have been spent, thanks to donated time and materials, he said. Two companies recently threw up a roof at no cost -- a \$50,000 value -- he said.

Church members, a few of them skilled in the trades, have done volunteer duty -- 125 of them on a recent Saturday alone -- he said.

Church leaders stumbled upon the foundering Ko-op 65's needs in 2005. Church members were volunteering en masse as they often have.

Ko-op 65 leaders were ready to give up the pantry, feeling as worn and tired as the building, said Rob Wegner, pastor of the church's outreach missions.

"It was something God dropped on our lap," Wegner said.

Ko-op 65 used to serve nearly 70 senior households. Now more than 300 households from the 46601 ZIP code come to the Monroe center's still-unfinished interior for boxes of food and even hot meals, Blacketor said.

It's part of the church's growing outreach work. It also tends projects for orphans in Mexico and tsunami victims in India, plus outreach in inner-city Chicago and Benton Harbor, he said.

Large new windows already funnel lots of light into the Monroe center. A fireplace and couches will give coffeehouse warmth to the upstairs.

The center is just east of the Monroe Circle apartments and senior "high-rise" of the South Bend Housing Authority. Two blocks to the west, on the other side of public housing, the Salvation Army plans to build a much bigger Kroc Center with aquatics area, gym, theater and greenhouse.

There might be just a little overlap, Blacketor said, in the visual and musical arts that the Monroe Center aims to do. But he said at least one church leader is involved with both projects, adding, "We don't want

duplicity."

The Monroe Center will serve people in the 46601 ZIP code area, Blacketer said. To learn local residents' needs, he said, organizers knocked on doors and held a forum at the Coveleski Stadium that drew about 200 people.

The Crossing Educational Center will open another branch of its faith-based alternative high schools here for at-risk kids. It already has schools at 1820 S. Michigan St. and in Goshen, Elkhart and Middlebury.

Beeson says the clients of the Monroe Center won't be required to pray to receive services. The center, he said, will be more about doing than saying the gospel.

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