

County confident in goal of children's museum

Nonprofit organization raised less than \$15,000 in its first fiscal year

By Mark Hrywna
Regional Editor

County officials are confident that \$1 million seed money will jump-start fund-raising efforts for a nonprofit group seeking to build a children's museum.

The Children's Museum of Central New Jersey Inc. raised \$13,615 from "direct public support" in its first fiscal year after forming in August 2001.

The group has raised considerably more in its second fiscal year, according to President Peter Hays, who did not have specific figures immediately available. The most recent fiscal year ended June 30 and financial statements filed with the state Office of Consumer Protection's Charitable Registration & Investigation Division likely will not be available until December.

The county had been in discussions with the nonprofit group for nearly a year before announcing at January's reorganization meeting a \$1 million grant as one of Freeholder Chairman Deborah Scanlon's initiatives for 2003.

\$1 million will be paid to CMCNJ in 10,000 installments over the next 18 months,

from the county's Open Space, Recreation and Historic Preservation Trust Fund.

The county funds will be used for architectural plans and exhibit designs over the next year and a half, Hays said.

She expects fund-raising efforts to receive a boost from the county's commitment of \$1 million.

Freeholder Alexander Mirabella, chairman of the board's Open Space, Recreation and Historic Preservation Trust Fund Committee, said the county's contribution will help the organization get started with serious fund-raising.

"It's not a concern because I don't think they've really started fund-raising," Mirabella said of the group's fund-raising to date. "I don't think they got outta the blocks yet."

"This is a group that has a good vision, it knows what it wants to do."

According to documents filed with the state, the Children's Museum of Central New Jersey was formed on Aug. 29, 2001. As of June 30, 2002, the organization had raised \$17,615, with all but \$4,000 in "direct public support," while spending \$11,958.90 for "management and general" expenses, leaving a balance of \$5,656.10.

The Children's Museum of Central New Jersey Inc. is aiming to raise between \$10 million and \$12 million for the project, with an expected timeline of three to five years before a facility is in operation.

"They seemed to have some pretty good ideas of where they're getting money from," Freeholder Mary Ruotolo, who was chairman of the Open Space Committee last year, said.

"It's much easier to fund-raise when you have seed money; then fund-raising becomes a better sell."

"It's certainly not our intention to pay for the construction of a museum," Ruotolo said.

"We've committed to the organization and the museum being here in Union County," Ruotolo said. "I believe any cultural addition is a benefit for kids, families, all of us."

The museum would be operated by the nonprofit organization, with an executive director overseeing day-to-day operations and serving as a liaison between the staff and Board of Trustees.

The board currently has 20 volunteer members but the organization's by-laws allow for as many as 30, Hays said. "It's a very diverse board

in every way; skills, ethnicity, socioeconomic." Among its members are former Acting Gov. Donald DiFrancesco and Barbara Bagger, the wife of former state Sen. Richard Bagger.

The county expects to have three representatives on the nonprofit's board, Mirabella said.

"We'll have a real say in what happens," he said, and the group will be responsible for accounting what is spent.

"It's a pretty impressive group," Ruotolo said of the nonprofit organization. "They're very committed and did lots of research. They're really energetic."

In discussions with the freeholders' Open Space Committee last year, she said, the group described the type of museum it wanted, with different options and stations, and the fact that it would be a bilingual museum.

Ruotolo said the museum is similar to Liberty Science Center in Jersey City, but "with some new ideas."

"The only place I've been that it's similar to is the Boston museum for kids."

Hays said her group has done its own informal studies and surveys, with the help of data

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Kids' museums on the rise

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from the Association of Children's Museums.

In a 2001 report, the Association of Children's Museums called children's museums "a new kind of town square," with the number of museums nationwide rising to almost 300; about 100 of those opened since 1990. In 1975, 38 children's museums existed.

The report also stated that there were 80 new children's museums in the planning phase at that time. The average cost to build or expand a facility is nearly \$15 million, up from \$11 million in 2000, according to the report. Last year, 33 million children and families visited a children's museum in the U.S. up from 8 million in 1991. Visiting children ranged in age from preschoolers to sixth- and seventh-graders at some locations, the report stated.

"This area is underserved," Hays said, adding that the group will embark on a formal feasibility study to focus on which property and the surrounding demographics.

As for where such a museum could be built, officials stress that they're keeping all their options open. The 13-acre Esposito Farm on Madison Hill Road in Clark was purchased by the county for \$5.45 million and a five-acre property on Green Lane in Union was purchased for \$3.4 million from the YM-WHA of Union County. Both are considered options, Mirabella said.

Before the Esposito Farm went on the market last summer, the county considered Warinanco Park as a potential site for the children's museum but several maintenance sheds would have had to be relocated. "I'm not sure that space would have worked," Ruotolo said.

But constructing a building on land acquired for open space is not what voters had in mind for a trust fund, Republican Wally Shackell said.

"I don't think anyone dreamed of giving gifts to a children's museum and black-topping with open space money," when voters approved the trust fund by referendum in 2000, he said.

"Given the state of property taxes, the huge county increases, to give \$1 million is really unfair to the Union County taxpayers."

"We're not opposed to a children's museum, we're opposed to taking what open space is left to build a building," Shackell said, adding that there must be plenty of other sites that could be redeveloped for a facility.

"There are many ways to go without taking open space."

Hays was frustrated that there appears to be "a division amongst towns. We're looking at central New Jersey as a whole; we're looking at all towns together, whether you're from Clark, Elizabeth, Westfield, we're looking at the entire county," Hays said.

"The county needs a children's museum," Hays said. "Children's museums have completely revitalized cities" all over the country.

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