

Brattleboro Reformer

Winston Prouty plans expansion

Early childhood education center eyes \$2 million renovation

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The Winston Prouty Center in Brattleboro. (Reformer file photo)

BRATTLEBORO >>

Early childhood education has come a long way since the Winston Prouty Center started in 1969.

When First Chance, as it was then called, opened it was one of the first programs in the country designed exclusively for preschool children with

special needs.

Today the Winston Prouty Center serves all children up to the age of six, and the center also provides programs for families.

Since moving to the former Christian Heritage School, near Living Memorial Park, in 2006, Winston Prouty has been expanding and the center is now ready to take its next big step. The Winston Prouty Center Board of Directors is about to launch a public capital campaign for its \$2 million planned expansion.

The early education center hopes to build a new two-story expansion on to the existing structure which will add about 6,407 square feet onto the existing 8,424-square-foot school. The proposed project would also expand the parking lot from 25 spaces to 42, and the early education center hopes to increase its enrollment from 46 students to 62, as well as add seven new staff members.

Winston Prouty officials will present the plan to the Development Review Board Wednesday night.

"This is something the board has been talking about for more than two years," said Winston Prouty Center Executive Director Chloe Learey. "We have a waiting list and if we are going to continue to grow and move forward, and play a role in serving families in this community, we need to plan for the future. That's what this project is about."

Since starting as an early education center devoted exclusively for children with special needs, Winston Prouty has been expanding its services. In the 1990s it was designated as the state regional host agency for special education services for birth to age three, and today it is also the host for Children's Integrated Services, or CIS.

Winston Prouty works with Health Care and Rehabilitation Services, Windham Childcare Association, and various state agencies to provide support to families with young children,

from prenatal to age 6. Parents and children receive services through CIS and more than 300 families are served through the program.

Frederic Noyes, who is on the board and is a member of the Building Committee, said that as Winston Prouty's programs have expanded the center's reputation throughout the community has grown.

The waiting list, coupled with the center's ever-growing need for more class and meeting space, drove the board to move ahead with the ambitious plan to grow the physical space by more than 75 percent.

"Office space is tight, the classrooms are at capacity, and everyone understands that the needs are not going to go away," Noyes said. "We have a very good reputation. People look around at what is available and see as one of the best options. It is very exciting to see this come together and to be taking this on for our future."

Learey said the proposed expansion would add two classrooms, upgrade the indoor play space, as well as create rooms for family support and education and improve the office and meeting space.

"We are on the front lines of so many of the issues facing families, and we want to continue to make our community better and stronger," Learey said.

Winston Prouty hopes to raise about \$400,000 through a local capital campaign, and will be applying for a USDA Rural Development loan.

On April 18 Winston Prouty is hosting Storytellers on a Mission at the Latchis Theater, produced by The Hatch, and the group will hold its inaugural Mini-Golf Classic on May 16.

The planned expansion also comes as early education is receiving a boost throughout Vermont, both through Gov. Peter Shumlin's Early Childhood Framework and Action Plan, which will be implemented this year, as well as thanks to a federal \$36.9 million, four-year Early Learning Race to the Top grant

Learey said about 75 percent of the project was designed to meet its current needs, and the rest allows for expansion into the future.

"This comes at a good time as people understand the value of investing in early childhood services," Learey said. "We already need this space, but we are riding that wave. It is a big puzzle to serve families and this is going to ensure we can continue to meet that need."

Learey said the organization hopes to begin work in the spring if the DRB approves the plans, and in the coming months Winston Prouty will be publicizing the project as it seeks to educate more people about the role it plays in supporting families in the area.

"We are a fully inclusive center that serves typically-abled children as well as children with special needs," she said. "We have been growing since we opened, and the needs are only getting more severe. We have been thinking about this for a long time, and it feels like the time is right."

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