

Center for Creative Education to Debut Early Renovation



Photo - Meghan McCarthy

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By Jan Sjostrom - Daily News Arts Editor

Eight years ago, the Center for Creative Education bought an 18,000-square-foot former roller rink in West Palm Beach and announced grand plans to turn it into a headquarters for its arts integration education programs and a community hub for the arts. Those dreams fell apart in 2008, when the recession hit and construction ceased. Donors drifted away and the organization's credibility plummeted.

CCE hopes to regain both when it unveils the 6,500-square-foot first phase of its renovation during an open house Friday night.

The renovation, which resumed in January, cost nearly \$1.1 million, and it's paid for. CCE's leadership has vowed not to incur long-term debt. The nonprofit group is developing the building and adding programming in stages, with an eye toward balancing the budget. It ended last fiscal year with a slight surplus for the first time since 2005.

Palm Beacher Danielle Hickox Moore served on the building committee when the group purchased the facility, but she became disenchanted when construction stalled. Now she's ready to give CCE a second chance. She's impressed with the renovation and the new leadership team, headed by chief executive officer Bob Hamon and board president Pamela Miller. "As disappointed as I was before, I'm thrilled now," she said.

The building is being renovated to be as flexible as possible, Hamon said during a recent tour of the facility at 425 24th St. The first phase includes two multi-purpose classrooms, a 75-seat flex-space, a demonstration kitchen that doubles as a staff break room and a classroom to teach cooking and healthy eating, a conference room, offices, restrooms and the Marjorie S. Fisher Gallery, where tall windows overlook 24th Street and the original Dade pine vaulted ceiling soars overhead.

But the building isn't all CCE wants to show off during the open house.

Students and classroom teachers who participated in CCE's Manatee Insanity, a 10-week program that involved 44 second-graders at Freedom Shores Elementary School in Boynton Beach, will display the book illustrations, board game, papier-mâché mother manatee and calf, journals and other projects that used the arts to teach science, technology, language arts and math.

Many of CCE's 65 teaching artists, who collaborate with site educators on CCE programs, will be on hand with examples of their work. The gallery will be filled with art created by CCE students.

"Most people don't know what we do," Hamon said. "This open house will say, 'Here's the new building — and oh, by the way, this is what we do.'"

In addition to the Freedom Shores students, CCE will serve 12,735 mostly elementary school-age students at after-school, summer camp and other sites this year.

The organization hopes to begin limited programming in the building this fall and ramp up to full use by January. Under consideration are art classes, adult ESOL and GED classes, and arts integration training for classroom teachers and teaching artists.

But before opening the doors to students, CCE would like to see more of the facility completed. If it can raise another \$235,000, it will be able to finish the \$250,000, 2,705-square-foot second phase, which would add four classrooms and more restrooms.

CCE can point to proof of public officials' renewed faith in the organization as it raises money. The county commission approved a \$550,000 grant in September, and the West Palm Beach Community Redevelopment Agency followed in March with a \$110,000 grant. CCE is overseeing the community service requirement for the CRA's Lot 23 — soon-to-open housing that offers artists reduced rent in exchange for work.

"We've looked at CCE's budget and growth plan and we're comfortable it can live up to what its projections and plans are," CRA redevelopment manager Kim Briesemeister said.

Operating costs in CCE's new home won't exceed what the group spent on rental offices and maintaining the building before the move, and programs will be added only when revenues support them, Hamon said.

Back in 2005, CCE's plans called for a 300-seat black-box theater, dance studio, theater shop, artists' studios and more. The post-recession CCE takes a more pragmatic approach. The board will begin work on a strategic plan this fall, during which it will decide how to best use the 8,795 square feet of unmapped space.