

'Safety net' agency gets dream home

What architectural project could be more rewarding than a facility that offers academic skills and self-esteem building to economically disadvantaged children, takes the homeless off the street, feeds the hungry and keeps families together through a variety of volunteer efforts. These individuals in Washington County have a "safety net" in the form of the Community Action Organization (CAO), a private, non-profit social service agency that has served Washington County since 1965. Unfortunately, the county's unprecedented growth resulted in needs far exceeding the agency's space and volunteer resources.

**BY
PATTI MERTZ**

The seeds of CAO's dream of a new, expanded facility were planted in the late 1980s. Planning started in 1993, and culminated with the October 1995 opening dedication on the agency's 30th anniversary. Yet, without the support and perseverance of many individuals throughout Oregon, this would have ended as just another unfunded social service project.

Strong community and financial support was easily generated because CAO's request made such good business sense. By consolidating all rented and leased facilities into one building, CAO would save \$100,000 per year in operating expenses, multiply the number of volunteers able to serve by a factor of six, triple the amount of meals served daily as well as the number of families served by Head Start education. And, by keeping the administration costs at their historical 7.5 percent, all future savings would continue to go directly to providing more services to those in need.

"One of the reasons this organization is so rewarding is because the agency does not simply hand money to people," said capital campaign chairwoman and former Hillsboro mayor Shirley Huffman. "This agency is there to help people become self-sufficient and take control of their own lives."

FUNDING A DREAM: Funding a \$3.5 million facility on a 2-acre site on

Southwest Baseline Road in Hillsboro involved a wide range of creative approaches. Volunteers promoted a host of fund-raising activities: a capital campaign sought \$1.3 million in community and business donations; two parcels of property were sold; three community development block grants raised \$1.2 million; personalized

bricks were sold; trees were sponsored; and a 5-kilometer run was held.

The block grants, an important source of funding for non-profit groups, are available through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. They are intended to develop viable urban communities by providing housing and expand-

ing economic opportunities, mainly for persons on low to moderate incomes.

RICH IN RESOURCES: Overall, just 30 percent of the cost of the building came from public sources. The balance came from private funding. "I'm very optimistic and very positive about humankind, so the fund-raising challenge was met with a smile," said Jerralynn Ness, CAO executive director for the past 11 years and a worker there since 1974. "I look at Washington County as very rich in resources, and if there ever was a community that could tackle poverty, this one can."

Architect Sid Scott, principal with Van Lom/Edwards, put this dream onto paper. Of the 16 sites that CAO operates in the county, it was determined that the four Hillsboro sites would be consolidated into a multi-service center to include client services, weatherization and housing, child

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The design for the agency's new digs was created by architect Sid Scott, principal with Van Lom/Edwards. The building has space for client services, weatherization and housing, child development, and administration and finance departments. Additionally, the new facility houses a child development center made up of five Head Start classrooms and the central kitchen for all Head Start centers in the county.

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development, and administration and finance departments. Additionally, the new facility would house a child development center made up of five Head Start classrooms and the central kitchen for all Head Start centers in the county.

"It was a real challenge to solve the program needs of five different departments that deal with public and administrative duties, and then mix in the requirements for 100 children in five different classrooms," Scott said.

The architectural solution resulted in putting the office and administrative spaces in a two-story structure that also provides flexible meeting space available for use by the general public. The facility also includes a family resource center providing adults access to job-hunting and housing information, and office space for six start-up,

non-profit human service organizations.

The Child Development Center is attached to the office building but maintains a distinct and separate entry. This single-story structure houses the classrooms, teacher's room, office space, and is partially

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surrounded by a large fenced outdoor play area. A curving wall adds visual interest to the central hall space and abundant natural light enlivens the colorful interiors.

The central kitchen is a full-service commercial facility, and can produce 2,000 meals a day to serve all county Head Start centers.

Split face concrete block, synthetic stucco, wood glulams and metal roofing were used as the exterior materials to provide texture, pattern and color. The combination gives the center a friendly and non-institutional appearance while providing materials with long-term durability and low maintenance. The selection of cost-effective building materials was an integral part of the project funding. The entire project team worked aggressively for CAO to contact suppliers and industry friends for donated or at-cost materials. From lumber to landscaping to carpet, the team provided significant construction cost savings.

"What was so wonderful about the Van Lom/Edwards team is that (it) always went the extra mile. We felt we weren't just another project on (its) books, but that they had a personal commitment to our success in a new facility," Ness said. "I remember a Saturday that Sid Scott and his partner, Kelly Edwards, along with their spouses, put up the wood fence surrounding the children's playground." Contractor Silco Construction also met the project challenges by dealing with numerous owner-furnished materials while keeping the building construction on schedule.

"It's not often that an architect gets involved at the level we did on the CAO project," Scott said. "We admired their mission and commitment to the community and wanted to give 110 percent to make the project a reality."

SETTING THE STANDARD: So, 30 years after President Lyndon Johnson declared the War on Poverty, the battle still is going on with much enthusiasm and renewed energy at CAO's facility. Adds Ness: "Our finished building is a success because our architect took the time to make sure all issues were addressed and everyone was heard. Our improved efficiency allows us to be much more creative about the services we provide to low-income families and children each day."□

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