

# After years of work, Third Street Center dream becomes reality

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Special to The Sopris Sun

It had been a dream for years. In two weeks, the Third Street Center will be a reality.

A lot of work remains between now and then, said Colin Laird, interim executive director for the Third Street Center. The grand opening isn't scheduled until mid-June.

But by May 1, about a dozen tenants will be in their new spaces, converting what had been an old, dingy elementary school into a well-lit, environmentally friendly non-profit center.

"I thought I would be doing this for the rest of my life," Laird said with a laugh. "I think everybody did. But I think there's a bit of a sigh of relief. It's a vision that a lot of people have held for a long time. These things never happen as quickly as you want them to, and then when you get to the end you run out of time."

Construction crews are still installing skylights and working on the roof. Parking and landscaping work will continue for a while. Furniture in common areas might not show up immediately.

But many of the tenants will. Non-profits such as YouthZone, LIFT-UP, Compass and the Jaywalker Lodge will be opening their new facilities. Solar Energy International will start holding classes at its new space in May. The Carbondale Council on Arts & Humanities (CAAH), which is in the midst of a major capital campaign for renovations to its new space, has an art show planned for First Friday in June, and it plans to be ready for it.

"Everybody is so excited to be there," said CCAH Executive Director Ro Mead.

At an open house last month, crews were still working as visitors came to check out the space. Roofers were pounding on the roof. Backhoes were rumbling outside. Many walls were just two-by-four framing. The floor was strewn with cords and pipes. But no one seemed to notice, Mead said.

"People were walking around saying, 'This is going to be great!' That's the kind of energy that's out there."

CAAH has the most ambitious plans for its space. It's about halfway through a \$150,000 capital campaign to raise money for the renovations, which will include expanded space for galleries, allowing CCAH to take advantage of traveling exhibits in addition to showcasing the works of local artists. The space also will include a class-



Johnny Weiss, executive director of Solar Energy International, pores over the plans for the organization's classroom space in the Third Street Center. Photo by Jane Bachrach

room, letting CCAH offer workshops on site instead of renting out space.

The group is still waiting to hear on two grants, Mead said, but she's optimistic it will be ready in time for the Carbondale Community School's exhibit on June 4.

"It's slow," she said. "It's a hard time to raise money. But so many people have come up to me and said, 'CAAH is the heart and soul of this community.' Of course, I cry every time I hear that. But you know, I don't think the community would not fund us, would not support us. I don't think at this point they'd let us fail. We love Carbondale and Carbondale seems to love us."

## Quality of life enriched

Organizers envision the Third Street Center as being a non-profit hub in a town rich with non-profits. Add to that a handful of artists who are establishing their studios there, and they're hoping it becomes a vibrant part of Carbondale's community life.

"It's a center for collaboration and partnerships and ongoing innovations for solving community problems and improving the quality of life in our community," Laird said. "What better way to engrain that into the fabric of the Third Street Center than having it be created by this community partnership?"

Unlike in Aspen, where the Red Brick Center and the Yellow Brick Center were

converted from schools to non-profit centers thanks to funding from the city, the Third Street Center lacked that kind of public support. Instead, a series of land exchanges put the school in the hands of the town in October 2008. The town leased the building and land to the newly formed non-profit Third Street Center for 49 years.

The non-profit took over the exhausting work of converting an old elementary school into a new non-profit center. Predevelopment financing came from philanthropist George Stranahan's Manaus Fund. Construction and permanent financing came from Alpine Bank.

"In some ways it's typical Carbondale," Laird said. "It's like, 'Well, no one can really do this by themselves. The town can't do it by itself. Is there another way we can do this?'"

Much of the school dates back to 1961. Some of the tenants – and its board members – went to school there. Additions came in 1967 and 1988, but none of it was designed with sustainability or architectural beauty in mind.

## 'Best deal in town'

Walking through it two years ago, when organizers brainstormed on how to make this non-profit center come to life, it looked more like an abandoned elementary school than a

fledgling nonprofit center. Unused shelves and file cabinets still littered the hallways.

Nearly all the spaces are leased now, although organizers are still trying to figure out what to do with a couple of awkward spaces. The old gymnasium is bigger than most non-profits would want to pay for, but it could make an ideal performance space. The old kitchen could be a good fit for a caterer or for a food service to serve the tenants once it's up to code.

Tenants sign a lease, from one year to five years, with a right to renew. The base lease is \$975 for a five-year lease, and the center can only increase it 2 percent a year. Even in tough economic times, that has proven attractive to tenants, who see long-term leases remaining reasonable at the center, even if the economy rebounds in the Roaring Fork Valley and rents rise elsewhere.

Tenants like CCAH and Wilderness Workshop, which want to design their own spaces, may do so, but they must cover the costs themselves.

"There aren't too many things like it," said Johnny Weiss, executive director of Solar Energy International. "If you're a non-profit organization looking for space, it's the best deal in town."

After trying to determine its plans, Solar Energy International opted to remain in its current non-profit space next to KDNK but create a new classroom space at the non-profit center.

SEI is holding trainings in 17 different states and a few foreign countries, Weiss said. Meanwhile, it's at work trying to build an "eco-campus" in Paonia. But the group wants to "keep a strong base here in Carbondale," he said, and the Third Street Center gave it a way to expand without leaving its current quarters.

"It's real exciting for us," Weiss said. "It's a great opportunity."

## A shared space

For many tenants, part of the excitement of the center is the ability to share space with other non-profits and artists. More than 25 tenants have signed on. They range from the artistic, such as Ballet Folklorico, to the environmental, including the Sustainability Center of the Rockies, to human services, like Youth Zone. The building is designed with "nodes" for different types of uses.

"We have so many expectations and

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ideas about what it could be for everybody at the center," said Amanda Emerson, director of enrichment services for Mountain Valley Developmental Services.

Her group is already in place there, offering day services for adults with developmental difficulties who either can't work or choose not to. Along with the non-profit group Senior Matters, it was one of the first tenants to occupy the Third Street Center. It's coming up on its first anniversary in May, when many other tenants will just be moving in.

Working in the midst of a construction project has been "a learning process," Emerson admitted, and not always an easy one. But she said she's excited to watch as the center comes together.

"We're very excited for the grand opening and seeing more people," she said.