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News

New Community Health Center halfway done in Middletown

Wednesday, May 11, 2011 9:21 PM EDT

By CLAIRE MICHALEWICZ, Press Staff

MIDDLETOWN — The new Community Health Center on Main Street reached a milestone Wednesday afternoon, as more than 100 people gathered to celebrate.

The steel frame of the building has been steadily growing since construction began less than six months ago, and construction workers, health center employees and local officials watched the final steel beam get lifted into place.

“Topping off” or “topping out” ceremonies are a tradition to celebrate the halfway point of construction, though health center founder Mark Masselli noted the building isn’t quite half-finished. After decking it out with an American flag, balloons and a branch of pine tree to bring good luck, workers hitched the beam to a crane and slowly lifted it in the air. The trip took about three minutes, and construction workers unfurled the flag once the beam was bolted in place.

“The whole point is kind of to emphasize that the Community Health Center has been behind the revitalization of Middletown for several generations,” said CHC spokeswoman Eliza Cole.

To show that, she said, the organizers invited children from Macdonough, as well as longtime North End residents who have been using the health center for decades.

“This project really makes the revitalization of the North End,” Cole said.

Students from Macdonough Elementary School participated in the building’s groundbreaking ceremony in November, and the same group returned on Wednesday to watch the beam be lifted into place.

Margaret Flinter, senior vice president at CHC, had the students guess how much the heavy metal beam weighed – guesses ranged from 500 pounds to several thousand. The actual weight is around 7,000 pounds, Flinter said.

Before the beam was lifted, the students and other guests, including Wesleyan President Michael Roth, Mayor Sebastian Giuliano, Deputy Mayor Joseph Bibisi, and council members Dan Drew and Deborah Kleckowski, had a chance to write a personal message on it with a marker.

“Well, the sun is surely shining today in Middletown,” said Larry McHugh, president of the Middlesex County Chamber of Commerce, joking about the overcast skies. But, he said, the health center is making the community a brighter place.

“To say I’m proud is an understatement,” he said.

Many people in the community have helped the CHC get its new building, McHugh and Masselli said. It's being constructed on a former city-owned parking lot adjacent to Eli Cannon's Tap Room. Masselli thanked the city for selling the property for a dollar and Eli Cannon's owner Phil Ouellette, who lost some of his customer parking to the CHC.

Constructions started in November, but the schedule was thrown off by this past winter's heavy snowfalls.

"But we're pretty close to being on-target," he said, explaining that he hoped the environmentally friendly building would open in February or March next year.

2012 will be the CHC's 40th anniversary — Masselli and a group of other Wesleyan University students founded it in 1972, with a goal of providing health care to anyone, especially people who couldn't otherwise afford it. Since then, it's been operating out of its current location across Grand Street from the new building, but that facility has become overcrowded and outdated.

The new facility will bring CHC's different services together under one roof, offering medical, dental and behavioral services to people who need them. With more space, Masselli said, CHC can expand its operations, hiring more employees and offering health care to more people.

Funding for the construction project came from a variety of sources, including a \$7 million grant from the Department of Health and Human Services and \$2.5 million from the state Bond Commission.

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