

Health center seeks more space

Middletown groups may collaborate

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MIDDLETOWN — The Community Health Center wants to open a clinic for infants and pregnant women in the soon-to-be vacant Hartford Courant office at 643 Main St., and The Buttonwood Tree arts center may share some of the space.

The health center's present maternal-infant care program next door to The Courant building in the North End has grown so much in recent years that it is in dire need of more space, said Margaret Flintner, the health center's vice president and clinical director.

At the same time, The Buttonwood Tree arts center and its parent organization, North End Arts Rising Inc., have been looking to expand from their current place on Rapallo Avenue so the arts center has more space for its bookstore and live performances.

The Courant is leaving the building, which it leases from the McCulley & Monahan realty office of Essex, to move to a new, larger office at 373 E. Main St. in early June.

Flintner called the collaborative effort with the arts group a "unique and creative approach" to two very different community needs.

Currently, space is so tight for the prenatal program that pregnant mothers take childbirth classes in the waiting room at night, and breastfeeding courses in a small, cramped space in the rear of the Health Center's medical building at 635 Main St.

In order to make the project work, the health center has applied for a \$200,000 community development block grant to pay part of the cost. The grant application calls for the health center to acquire the 6,000-square-foot Courant building for about \$100,000 and lease the rear 2,000 square feet (currently a garage) to the arts organization.

The building, at Main and Grand streets, would be extensively renovated at an estimated cost of about \$240,000. The block grant would

cover part of the acquisition and renovation costs. The health center would pay for whatever isn't covered by the grant. The project is estimated to take nine months from purchase to occupancy.

Flintner stressed that the arts group would operate entirely on its own, and the health center is in no way seeking any administrative control of the organization.

The Buttonwood Tree would have a separate entrance facing Grand Street in the rear of the new building.

The health center's grant application will be discussed at Monday's meeting of the Citizens Advisory Committee. The meeting starts at 5 p.m. in the council chambers of city hall.

The federally funded block grants are in high demand this year. Assistant Director for Municipal Development Linda A. Ozga said there are 32 applications this year, twice the number filed last year.

The requests total \$1.58 million, while the city anticipates having \$708,000 available for funding, Ozga said. The health center's request is one of the largest.

The applications will be discussed by the advisory committee again May 18, and funding recommendations will be made to the common council June 6, Ozga said. The council makes the final decisions.

The Buttonwood Tree's executive director, Stephan Allison, shares Flintner's optimism for the venture.

"We welcome the expansion possibilities that would come to us in the new space and building bridges between various service organizations within the city is seen by us as a positive move," Allison wrote in a letter attached to the application.

This is not the first time the health center and The Buttonwood Tree have collaborated. Last year, the two agencies sponsored a summer arts and computer program for children.

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