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Reeb Elementary School begins rebirth as community center

By Mark Ferenchik and Mark Williams

Jeff Wilson stood outside the old Reeb Elementary School yesterday morning, clad in a black Def Leppard T-shirt and looking forward to continuing his education.

Wilson, a 42-year-old auto mechanic, never received a high-school diploma but said he wants to earn a GED one. He plans to take classes at Reeb when it reopens next year as a community social-services center for the South Side.

"This is actually benefitting me," said Wilson, who lives on nearby Innis Avenue. A GED diploma, he said, "would be another notch in my belt."

Yesterday was the groundbreaking for the work to transform the 110-year-old brick school building into a South Side anchor — the Reeb Avenue Center.

The social-services center at 280 Reeb Ave. will include a Boys and Girls Club, the South Side Learning and Development Center and job-training services. The city's Neighborhood Pride office also will be housed there, and St. Stephen's Community House will host a program for families dealing with abuse and neglect.

The center will serve hot lunches for the neighborhood's poor and house a food bank. And the Godman Guild will provide the GED classes.

The building should be ready for tenants by late summer 2015, in time for next school year. Wilson said he is happy that the center will host 76 full-time jobs, half of them new.

Gov. John Kasich was there for the groundbreaking yesterday. So were Mayor Michael B. Coleman and Columbus City Council members.

During the presentation, Joseph Haviv, the chairman of Columbus Castings, told the crowd about the company's plan to add 550 jobs to its nearby South Side foundry.

Coleman said he hopes the Reeb center, along with the nearby John R. Maloney South Side Health Center and Nationwide Children's Hospital, will encourage commercial development along Parsons Avenue.

"This neighborhood had been neglected for too many years," Coleman said.

Kasich said the cooperation among the Reeb school partners could be an example to the nation if the center is successful.

One person who would have wanted to be there was Carrie Garnes, the longtime neighborhood activist who died in July at age 91. Her daughter, Donna Bates, said her mother would be happy that the center will provide services once supplied by the former South Side Settlement House.

“She’d be glad a building over 100 years old still has purpose,” said Bates, who attended the school.

The project is estimated to cost about \$13 million, including \$11.6 million in construction costs. Funding includes \$6.7 million from the city and \$2 million in state capital money.

Businesspeople with South Side ties also have contributed, including \$1.5 million from the Grote family (Donatos), and

\$1 million each from the Crane Group/Crane family and developer Don Kelley and his wife, Nancy.

An endowment is being created to offset operating costs for the building and make it more affordable for nonprofit tenants. About \$1.1 million in contributions from families and companies has been secured or is pending.

Haviv said the redeveloped school will provide a training ground for workers that Columbus Castings will need to hire over the next three years as employment doubles to 1,100 people. He said he hopes that students will learn basic training at the school. Eventually, he’d like to see students learn to be welders and machinists.

Haviv also emphasized the importance of the jobs to move people into the middle class. “You have to provide blue-collar employment because that is the road out of poverty,” he said.

The area the center will serve is bounded by Frebis Avenue, Champion Avenue, Rt. 104 and High Street. About 6,900 people live in the area, which had a 43 percent poverty rate and an unemployment rate of 20 percent.