

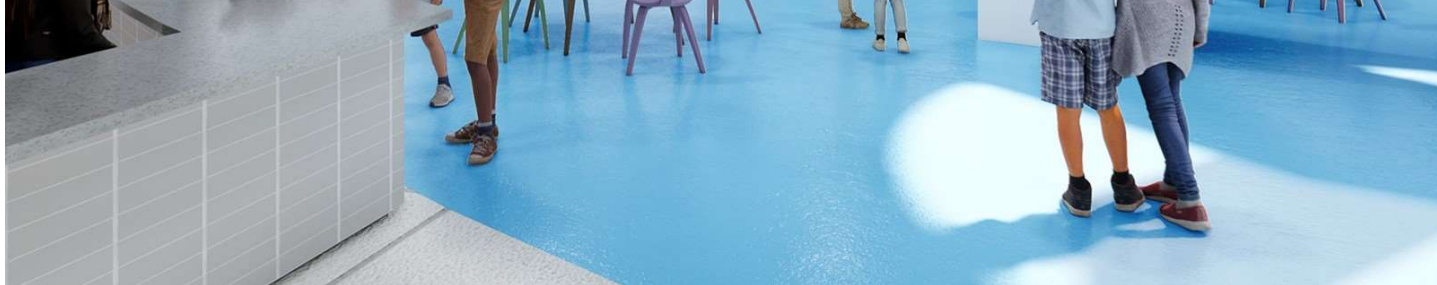
Building a dream

Renovations under way as capital campaign continues



Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell Joe Hungler shows the progress being made by June 29, 2023 in what was once the club's pool that will be turned into a large multipurpose space and cafeteria. PETER CURRIER — LOWELL SUN





Artist rendering of how the lower level of the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell will appear following a renovation and expansion. The lower level will have a brightened interior and expanded cafe and community center in the space once occupied by the pool. COURTESY BOYS & GIRLS CLUB OF GREATER LOWELL

BY PETER CURRIER

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LOWELL >> Renovations are under way in the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell, with the full expansion project expected to kick off in September to make room to offer opportunities to more potential members.

Those walking into what was once the club's pool may hardly recognize the room. The pool is filled in and workers are moving forward with turning the area into a multipurpose space that will also serve as a larger cafeteria. The hope, club officials said, is for this space to be completed by mid-August.

This work is part of Phase 1 of a three-phase project to renovate and add to the aging building to make space for its membership to double. Space for a new Teen Center is being added to give teens an area that is more exclusive to their age group, the arts program will be expanded to include dance and theater, and there will be a larger cafeteria space so that the kids won't have to eat in as many shifts. The cafeteria currently has space for 90 kids and serves an average of 225 meals per day. The larger cafeteria will fit 500 kids at once.

The club's building on Middlesex Avenue was opened in 1974, and has grown to now serve 300 8- to 18-year-olds in Greater Lowell on a daily basis. Through this expansion project, the club will have room to serve up to 600 members daily.

The project is being funded largely through the club's "Believe & Become" fundraising campaign, which to date has raised \$11.6 million of its \$22.5 million goal. That includes \$17.5 million for construction, \$3 million for ongoing operations, \$1 million for reserves and \$1 million for the club's endowment.

"We have been able to find a lot of new donors, a lot of people who hadn't been familiar with the club before," said Executive Director Joe Hungler. "And people are also realizing that we do more than just recreation, and we have things like robotics and art."

One of the overarching goals of the project is to give the club better tools to help end generational poverty in Greater Lowell, and to offer pathways to success that some kids may have trouble finding strictly in a classroom. While the physical locations of some of the

programs for arts or engineering will be moved around in the club with the expansion, Hungler highlighted some of the real, tangible benefits these programs have had.

“One of the kids in our music program, he learned how to make beats. When he graduated high school he was selling them for \$500 a pop. Now I don’t know what he sells for, but he lives in Los Angeles,” said Hungler. “Basically he learned how to make beats here, and now that is his career, and he didn’t have to go through the debt of college to do it, because college isn’t for everybody.”

Getting kids through their primary education is a priority for the club, however, and the expansion is aimed at making more space for club members to be able to focus on their academics.

“With the expansion, we want to have four other educational spaces,” said Deputy Executive Director JuanCarlos Rivera. “We don’t have a lot of quiet space in the club. One-on-one tutoring can be hard.”

Rivera said that there will be a tutoring room, a homework room, a library and a meditation room for the club members in the new expansion.

The makerspace, a room dedicated to hands-on activities like art, sewing and screen printing, will be moved during the expansion so that the room can be made into a new teaching kitchen, Rivera said. The kitchen will attach to the new, larger cafeteria and it will be able to host large cooking workshops.

Hungler said that the club at its core is about the kids in the community it serves, and thus club members were given a lot of say in the design of the expansion.

“We don’t want a school. We don’t want a factory. What we want is the workplace of the future,” said Hungler, recounting the input the club members gave for the design.

The idea of making the Teen Center a more separate space from the rest of the club, including a separate entrance, Hungler said, is to make teens feel like the club isn’t just for young kids. It will also include more focused workforce development and college readiness programs.

“The Teen Center needs to be a place where teens want to go. If teens don’t want to walk into the building, [the project] doesn’t matter,” said Hungler.

When the project is complete, the hope is that more members will enroll in the club to give more people a chance at ending generational poverty.

“Massachusetts has the best education system in the world, if you look like me. If you come from the wrong zip code, that isn’t necessarily true,” said Hungler. “Our kids come from those zip codes, but they end up doing 10 to 15% better than their peers in terms of grades and in terms of graduating on time.”

The actual expansion of the building is expected to begin with the new Teen Center in September, with the hope that it will be completed in April 2024. Phase 2 of the project will consist of the new kitchen and other interior renovations. Phase 3 will be focused on

exterior improvements, with the full project having an estimated completion of summer of 2025.

In the meantime, the Believe & Become campaign continues, and Hungler said that more significant donations are expected.

“The best part is that the people who give feel really good about it,” said Hungler. “Every single person who has given the club a significant gift for this campaign ends it with, ‘Thank you so much,’” said Hungler. “I’m like, ‘You just wrote us a check bigger than what I’ll ever be able to write in my lifetime.’ They are so appreciative of the opportunity to be a part of this and it makes them feel good.”

For more information and to contribute to the campaign, visit believe.lbgc.org.