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GIFT WILL HELP LOTS OF BOYS AND GIRLS *BECCY*

TANNER, The Wichita Eagle

A proposal to benefit the youth of Wichita got a \$2 million boost Wednesday.

The Kansas Health Foundation made a \$2 million donation to help fund the development of programs for the Boys & Girls Club of South Central Kansas and a pre-kindergarten learning center for low-income and single-parent families, known as the Opportunity Project.

Both organizations are to be located on the former Heartspring campus on Jardine, north of 21st Street.

Planning for the centers began more than a year ago as city leaders sought to revitalize the 21st Street corridor.

Russ Meyer, chairman of the 21st Street Committee, said the health foundation's \$2 million will be used to develop programs for both groups; \$1.5 million will go to the Boys & Girls Club; \$500,000 for the Opportunity Project.

Marni Vliet, president and chief executive for the Kansas Health Foundation, said her organization's involvement with the 21st Street development "was an opportunity we couldn't pass up."

Normally, she said, the health foundation does broader statewide and regional education and communication projects.

But the foundation was drawn to the fact that nearly 11,000 children under the age of 18 could benefit from programs at the centers, she said. Also, lessons learned from the 21st Street project could be used to assist programs in other communities.

"If it is good for the children it is good for all of us," Vliet said. "I have this dream for Kansas

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communities everywhere, and this one may be the first where this comes true, where you or I can walk into the community and see children playing with other children, where you meet parents and grandparents ... This is a place where people are reaching out and changing the horizon."

The new \$4 million learning center is already under construction.

It is expected to open next August and serve about 200 children. It will be the second learning center opened and funded largely by the Barry L. and Paula M. Downing Foundation. The other center is in Oaklawn.

Both centers will work in partnership with public service organizations and schools.

The health foundation money, Barry Downing said, will help pay to test children, develop individual education plans and train teachers.

In June, an \$8 million capital campaign was launched to build the new 40,000-square-foot Boys & Girls Club. More than half of that has been raised. It is expected to be completed by spring 2007.

Ron Holt, president of the Boys & Girls Clubs, said the new center will more than quadruple the space available at the existing club, currently in a renovated grocery store at 21st and Grove.

The new center will feature a computer center, learning center, gymnasium, arts, dance and music facilities, a greenhouse, teen center and community room.

"We are extraordinarily grateful for this wonderful gift," Holt said.

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