

A \$10.5 MILLION PLAN FOR IMPOVERISHED WICHITANS PROJECT TO HELP KIDS ESCAPE INTO HOPE

ROY WENZL, THE WICHITA EAGLE

Russ Meyer will stand near 21st and Grove this morning and describe how he and entrepreneur Barry Downing plan to give 11,000 kids a \$10.5 million way out of doubt, crime and poverty, starting next year.

At 10 a.m., at a tent set up outside Cessna's 21st Street training facility, Meyer, Downing and other community leaders will describe plans to build a campus north of 21 st Street that will include an \$8 million Boys & Girls Club and a \$2.5 million preschool similar to The Opportunity Project Learning Center, a public-private partnership Downing backed in south Wichita two years ago.

The goal of both buildings will be vigorous intervention to get kids out of crime, illiteracy and poverty, said Meyer, who is the chairman emeritus of Cessna.

"From my own experiences with people in poverty, I know that most of the kids who grow up with crime and broken homes and low literacy rates don't stand much of a chance in this life," Meyer said. "This campus will give them that chance."

The campus staffs will offer computer training, drama, math, language arts, sports, counseling and many other skills to an estimated 11,000 children 18 or younger who live within a mile or so of 21st and Grove. They also will offer parent education.

The new TOP school will start in August 2006 and will eventually offer year-round preschool **for** 150 to 200 children, Downing said Tuesday.

The Boys & Girls Club, which will nearly triple the space of the old club nearby, could open in March 2007.

Meyer and Downing say the **millions** they **plan** to raise and invest are not a cost but an investment **for** all of Wichita.

"Early intervention like this could eventually and dramatically cut crime rates, increase literacy, and turn kids away from drugs, gangs and other crimes," Meyer said. "We've worked hard to do this right, and I have to tell you, I've looked around a lot, and I don't know of any program anywhere that is similar to what we're planning to do here."

The TOP program Downing established two years ago (27 teachers, 160 children, year-round day-care) has increased education and social skills **for** hundreds of prekindergarten kids in the Oaklawn neighborhood, Downing said.

Kindergarten teachers from several schools have reported a dramatic, positive difference with kids coming out of that program, he said. They are much better able to handle school than peers who did not attend the program.

"Not only are they doing better intellectually, but this has a dramatic impact on these kids' self-esteem," Downing said. "This is going to make a big difference **for** the city down the road."

Poverty, illiteracy and crime feed off each other, Meyer said.

"The facts are clear and compelling," he said of the 21 st Street area. "Test scores and graduation rates in this area are low. Crime rates are high. These children need an environment which provides structure, discipline, meaningful activities and mentoring from people who care so that they can grow up to be healthy, tolerant, thoughtful and contributing adults."

Downing is financing the preschool. Meyer and a committee of neighborhood people and community leaders **plan** to raise the \$8 **million for** the Boys & Girls Club over the next few months. That will be tough in the current economic climate, he said, but it will be done.

Meyer committed to this project several years ago after seeing what happened to a number of poor families after he and Cessna started Cessna's 21 st Street training facility in 1990.

That program trained hundreds of poor people and turned many of them into taxpaying Cessna workers.

Several months ago, Meyer called together hundreds of neighborhood people in two meetings, asking what kind of campus they'd like to see built in their community. Many of the **plans** to be announced today came from those meetings, he said.

The new Boys & Girls Club will be built just north of the Cessna training facility.

A 6-0 vote on the Wichita City Council on Tuesday approved a lease agreement **for** the property that cleared the way **for** Meyer to arrange the public announcement today.

The buildings will occupy land formerly used **for** the old Heartspring logopedics Center. It's a prime location **for** the intervention Meyer and Downing want to accomplish.

There will be enough land left over **for** more construction, Meyer said: possibly a neighborhood community center, and possibly a future elementary school, if the Wichita school district wants it.

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What's planned

A **\$10.5 million** campus north of 21st Street near Grove in an area where 39 percent of children live in poverty and 27 percent grow up in single-parent homes.

A new club

A new Boys & Girls Club building will feature a computer center, gym, arts and dance space, greenhouse, community room, teen center and sports facilities.

-- Size: 45,000 square feet

-- Cost: **\$8 million**

top preschool

The Opportunity Project's school will better prepare 150 to 200 preschoolers **for** kindergarten. It will include bilingual education, year-round day care, health care and nutrition services.

-- Size: 25,000 square feet

-- Cost: **\$2.5 million**

Someday?

The site also includes space **for** a possible elementary school and community center.

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