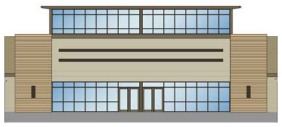

Former Wal-Mart building in Lexington will house offices, classrooms, lab and industrial space, more.

The former Wal-Mart building in Lexington will soon bustle with another kind of energy.

College, high school, preschool and technical training classes are planned in the 64,000 square-foot structure nestled along Plum Creek Parkway in Lexington. Joint space for computer and industrial labs, conference rooms and more is also in the blueprint.

Called “The Dawson County Opportunity Center,” Jen Wolf describes the venture as an opportunity to increase skilled labor in Dawson County.

“It opens up the doors for more skilled labor with the space to be able to design training specific for our business and industry in the county,” said Wolf, director of Dawson Area Development (DAD) which is partnering with the City of Lexington and others in planning the center. “We now have all the players and the space.”

The City of Lexington owns the building.

Wolf said a $512,200 neighborhood stabilization grant the agency recently received from the Nebraska Department of Economic Development will help renovate 9,354 square feet of joint space for such things as computer and industrial labs, rooms for heavy equipment and

conference rooms for teleconferencing.

Renovation of office and other space will be funded by the City of Lexington and other entities involved in the project.

Lease arrangements will be worked out with the City of Lexington, she said.

So far, Lexington Public Schools will have room for a preschool and an alternative education program while Central Community College will relocate in the center from a downtown location and offer courses.

A workforce development office, now located across the street from Lexington High School, will move into the center as well as a satellite office for DAD to manage its county career Web site.

In addition, the Lexington Chamber of Commerce will move its office there.

Wolf said they are also working with the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture in Curtis, the University of Nebraska at Kearney, Tyson Fresh Meats, the Dawson County Sheriff's Office and more businesses and services to have offerings in the center.

"We didn't want to be a college campus but wanted a place where people knew they could register for a job or hire people or do training," Wolf explained. "It will be a one-stop shop."

Another exciting part of the opportunity center, she said, will be incubator space for a start-up business or other type of entrepreneurial venture.

"Maybe it's a business that needs to wait for a patent," she said.

Wolf said the importance of entrepreneurial space came about from focus meetings with different groups while planning the opportunity center.

In addition to entrepreneurs, she said educators, health-care providers, agricultural producers and workforce development people met to discuss what they would like to see included in the opportunity center.

Special needs such as sinks for nursing classes or specific power requirements for manufacturing classes have also been considered.

OPPORTUNITY CENTER

Vision: To support economic and community development in Dawson County through workforce training and consolidation of services and pooling of resources.

Goals:

- Creating a one-stop service center offering quality education and training for area residents.
- Providing information and services to assist job seekers through development of career paths.
- Expanding opportunities for non-degree programs relating to technical skills, apprenticeship and certifications.
- Providing space for existing county programs.
- Offering new programs and innovative services.
- Providing meeting and classroom facilities to serve the county.

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