

Boys & Girls Club to break ground this fall on West Street

By **STEVE COLLINS**
STAFF WRITER

BRISTOL — After years of planning, the Bristol Boys and Girls Club expects to break ground this fall on a new \$9 million facility on West Street.

"It's fantastic news," said Michael Suchopar, the club director. "It's going to be a great thing for kids. And its going to be something great for Bristol."

The new building will include two full-size basketball courts, a large multi-purpose room, a

library, a teen center, a game room, classrooms, a computer lab and much more — all of it showcased within a modern structure with lots of light and windows.

The clubhouse is slated to contain 24,000 square feet of space while the adjoining field house, containing the basketball courts, would add another 14,000 square feet. Taken together, they'll contain a little space than an entire football field.

The new club is slated to face West Street between Gaylord and Jacobs streets — the site of



The old Boys & Girls Club on Laurel Street in Bristol.

Mike Orazzi | Staff

the former St. Ann's School that was razed about 15 years ago. A parking lot would be constructed

behind it.

The design aims to allow people to see from the street into the busiest and most high-tech parts of the building, showing off both its anticipated bustle and its offerings at the same time.

Suchopar said it will have plenty of space for recreational and social activities.

He said the new club will be much more than an athletic facility for youngsters. It will cater to a far wider range of their needs, he said, and serve the community as a whole. Suchopar said there will be space there for community meetings and more.

"It helps build a strong community to have a place for kids and adults to cooperate," Suchopar said.

Several city officials said the new building, which should be ready to open by late in 2013, is likely to prove a godsend for the struggling West End.

The club currently provides services for up to 1,000 children a day and each year interacts with more than half the middle school age students in town.

Its members almost always graduate from high school and many go on to solid careers, even those who come from troubled homes in struggling neighborhoods.

The club has long since outgrown its outmoded and somewhat dingy quarters on Laurel Street, just down from City Hall. The old club, once abandoned, will be sold.

The club also has two other major downtown buildings — the Imagine Nation museum and the former Bristol Girls Club on Upson Street. The old girls club is largely unused now, its fate uncertain. The club has raised quite a bit of the funding for the new building but needs to conduct a public push for the remaining money later this year.

Suchopar said it is also seeking to create an endowment of \$2 to \$3 million so the new building can be maintained and updated properly as the years pass.

The state kicked in \$2 million toward the project in September. ESPN has also contributed. Suchopar said he's eyeing a ground-breaking in September or October.

The city's Zoning Commission will have to give its blessing to the plan beforehand. City Planner Alan Weiner said it will require at least a special permit and site plan approval in order to proceed.

Land use officials will likely get a submission this spring. A public hearing will be part of the approval process.

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