

Meal center, civic center in Benton

Written by Sean Green

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Bossier Council on Aging, town to make use of donated space

Benton could soon be home to a meal site for seniors and, hopefully, a full-fledged senior activities center.

Space located at 102 Bellevue Rd. Suite 500 — the corner of Bellevue and Hwy. 3 — is planning to serve as a Bossier Council on Aging (BCOA) meal site as well as a senior activities center and potential civic center for the town of Benton.

The space was donated by State Rep. Jeff Thompson, R-Bossier City, after a discussion with BCOA Director Tamara Crane.

"It all started when I visited with Tamara about their meals on wheels and how their funding had been cut so they've had to cut back on amount of people they contact and for homebound folks, that may be the only contact they have," said Thompson.

"We're looking forward to being in Benton and it will create a job for someone to run the senior center," said Crane. "We will even be taking seniors grocery shopping and getting those seniors out in the community."

Thompson is part owner of a complex with 13 units. When approached for donating space for a meal center, the discussion evolved into senior citizen center for activities. That was when he donated space at less than half of rental value.

Benton Mayor Wayne Cathcart and Alderman James Friday wanted to see the meals offered in Benton and decided to pay the remainder.

Cathcart told the Press-Tribune he is still drafting the cooperative endeavor agreement and

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would know more about the situation in January.

Thompson worked to bring this deal to fruition because he is a big believer in helping the council on aging.

"I've been trying to help where I can for a number of years," said Thompson. "My grandmother used to work at a senior center. In law school, I did a summer internship with the AARP in Washington D.C. and in law school I did a study of legal needs of the indigent elderly in Louisiana."

The BCOA's goal was to eventually expand outside Bossier City into the northern portion of parish.

"We know there's a need in both Benton and Haughton and our goal is to have sites in those areas and Benton was able to come to the table with funding," said Crane.

Right now, BCOA can only afford one meal site in their budget. The ability to offer up the site as a full fledged senior center — requirements are transportation, open a minimum of five days each week for four hours per day, wellness equipment, recreation materials, meals provided, and information and assistance available — also depends on how next year's budget shapes up.

Something that is very much up in the air.

"Gov. Jindal proposed move BCOA under medicaid. If it happens, we don't know what that means," said Crane. "Our money from Governor's Office of Elderly Affairs makes up 50 percent of my budget, so funding could be cut July 1."

As of now, the plan is to begin offering meals in early February and feed 20 to 25 seniors, Monday through Thursday from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m.

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“Benton has seniors that aren't really homebound, but because there's no site, they are homebound. So now a meal site will allow them to be social, as human beings naturally are,” said Crane. “When you deliver to a door, you only interact a few minutes, but a meal site gets them more interaction.”

The space is leased for three years, but even better for the Benton and BCOA, they can re-up for more once the rental period ends and also pull out if funding is cut.

"If BCOA funding goes away then the city has no obligation," said Thompson.

Those who are already a client do not need to contact BCOA, but non clients needs an assessment and contact BCOA 24 hours ahead of time if they plan to use the meal site.

“Anyone can come to the site, even if live outside Benton area. Anybody that can drive can come to it,” said Crane.