

Kroc Center nearing completion

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The impressive new Ray and Joan Kroc Corps Community Center the Salvation Army is building at 2500 S. Division Ave. in Grand Rapids is nearing completion — and already transforming the neighborhood around it. It also serves as a model for others being built in Wisconsin and Indiana.

Representing a total investment by the Salvation Army, the Krocs and the Grand Rapids community of nearly \$60 million, the 99,000-square-foot building surrounded by acres of play areas and sports facilities is being built by Erhardt Construction of Ada and is slated for occupancy in October.

“What makes us really proud of this job is what we’ve been able to get for the owner, as far as bang for the buck,” said Dale Bramer, senior vice president at Erhardt.

“They’re getting more amenities in this project than they got in any of their other (Kroc Center) projects, for what they are paying,” he added. “In fact, they are using this project as a model project for many of the other facilities that are being built.”

Ray Kroc, founder of the McDonald’s hamburger chain, and his wife established a trust of \$1.6 billion to build Salvation Army community centers in underprivileged neighborhoods around the country.

The first Kroc Center was completed in San Diego in 2001.

The Krocs encouraged communities to match their funds to apply for the grants; seven communities in the Salvation Army’s Midwest region were approved for Kroc Centers. The center in Omaha began construction in mid-2007;

the Grand Rapids center was second in the region to break ground, in October 2008. Others are being built or will be built in Detroit, Chicago, Quincy, Ill., St. Joseph County, Ind., and Green Bay.

Erhardt has “done an incredible job and we have recommended them repeatedly to a lot of other centers” just starting construction, said Kris Palosaari, development director for the Salvation Army West Michigan/Northern Indiana division.



Norris

Bramer said the builders of the Green Bay and St. Joseph County centers have contacted Erhardt with questions about the project.

Cost of construction of the Grand Rapids

Kroc Center is slightly more than \$22 million. The two-story building, designed by Isaac V. Norris & Associates, 1209 Kalamazoo Ave. SE in Grand Rapids, is being built for LEED Gold certification.

Israels Designs for Living provided interior design, with landscaping on the 20-acre site designed by R.J.M.

Isaac V. Norris said the building was designed with durability in mind, “for a 50- to 80-year lifespan.” A great deal of glass in the construction allows a lot of natural light into the building, he noted, adding to its energy efficiency.

The area is one of the poorest in Grand Rapids, with more than 11,000 children under the age of 18 living within a one-mile radius of the center, according to Palosaari. She said the population is an equal mix of white, Hispanic and Afri-

can-American families.

Because childhood obesity, lack of exercise and a lack of positive recreational activities for youth and children are recurring problems in poor urban neighborhoods, the Kroc Center is specifically designed to address that. The building contains athletic and recreational facilities including a swimming pool, therapy pool, fitness center, gymnasium and climbing tower, plus game rooms, classrooms, public meeting areas and a chapel.

The 20-acre site, bordered by Division Avenue on the west, Madison Avenue on the east, Alger Street on the north and Ken-o-sha Drive on the south, is completely dedicated to fun and healthy pastimes, with playing fields for softball, volleyball and soccer. There are basketball courts, too, which will be flooded in winter for a supervised skating rink.

“A lot of them have transportation issues,” said Palosaari, referring to the area’s youth who would probably enjoy skating at Rosa Parks Circle downtown if it weren’t so far away.

She said the outdoor amenities also will include a challenge course, a sledding hill, and a fishpond fed by Plaster Creek, which winds through the site.

“People that go through it are really astounded by what is in the Kroc Center,” said Bramer. “Most people didn’t understand what was involved in this project.”

Palosaari said there were many parcels that went into the final 20-acre site, with the city of Grand Rapids helping the Salvation Army expedite the transactions.

“The real estate market (in that area) has improved,” said Palosaari, and real estate agents have been



DALE BRAMER, SENIOR vice president at Erhardt Construction, is pictured in front of the new Ray and Joan Kroc Corps Community Center the Salvation Army is building at 2500 S. Division Ave.

Photo by Michael Buck

touting the Kroc Center as a “great selling tool” due to its improvement of the overall area. The cities of Grand Rapids and Wyoming have helped with improvement of the adjacent infrastructure.

The ultimate total gift from the Krocs for the Grand Rapids center amounted to \$41.5 million, according to Palosaari, with a community fund drive of \$14 million and a \$1 million challenge grant from the Kresge Foundation of Troy providing most of the balance.

Erhardt began working with the Salvation Army on the project in 2005, according to Bramer.

“We went through a lot of different pricing scenarios, a lot of budget” changes, he said, as the matching funding sources were evolving at the same time. The first building plan was a 72,000-square-foot facility, which then went down to a 68,000-square-foot building, then it started heading back up again. Further complicating the planning stage was the uncertainty of where the center would actually

be located.

“It was a moving target for a long time, until we started construction,” he said.

Erhardt Construction was started by Larry Erhardt Sr. in 1962, “in the basement of his home,” according to Bramer. The company is known for its major projects in downtown Grand Rapids: It was construction manager and general contractor on the Amway Grand Plaza hotel and the Calder Plaza building, and construction manager with a joint venture partner on the Van Andel Arena, Van Andel Institute and DeVos Place.

Finding new projects is much more challenging than three or four years ago, he said, because of the recession. Erhardt has generally worked within a 100-mile radius of Grand Rapids but is looking at expanding to other states. The company’s full-time staff is now somewhere between 60 and 70, although that number was more than 100 back when business was very good.