

Abandoned Kelso tavern to become site of CAP training center

By Amy M.E. Fischer / The Daily News | Posted: Friday, November 18, 2011 8:45 pm



Bill Wagner / The Daily News - The former Corner Tavern in the 400 block of South Pacific Avenue will be remodeled this winter into a cafe, job-training and senior meals preparation site run by Lower Columbia CAP

A long-vacant South Kelso tavern will be reborn next spring as Grounds for Opportunity, a cafe and food-service industry job skills training center run by Lower Columbia Community Action Program.

Friday, the Longview social service agency held a groundbreaking ceremony at the Kelso Train Depot, a half-block away from the Corner Tavern. Over the winter, contractor JH Kelly will transform the neglected building with painted-over windows at the corner of Ash Street and South Pacific Avenue into a fully functioning restaurant for the general public.

The cafe also will serve as CAP's central kitchen for daily preparation of Meals on Wheels and senior community lunches as well as a job-training site for residents who need to expand their skills. Starbucks will be the restaurant's supplier of coffee products.

"I love this idea, and I love that it's from us, it's from our hearts," CAP foundation board president Tim Welch said.

Kelso Mayor David Fatcher said renovating an underused piece of property into a vibrant piece of downtown would benefit the surrounding businesses.

"It's a pleasure to see more development in downtown," he told the crowd of elected officials, CAP employees and board members and local stakeholders.

CAP Executive Director Ilona Kerby has been working on the project since 2006, when she first visited a program in Seattle based on the nationally successful Catalyst Kitchens model (formerly called Kitchens with Missions). Afterward, CAP considered buying two different buildings in downtown Longview for the venture before buying the 10,000-square-foot Corner Tavern last year.

Portland-based Ankrom Moisan Architects, a firm with expertise in designing restaurants and kitchens, created the final design with Kerby and JH Kelly. The restaurant and training kitchen are expected to open in February. The cost of buying and rehabilitating the Corner Tavern and starting operations is \$700,000, according to CAP.

The training program offers a 16-week course that teaches trainees all aspects of the food preparation and service industry. While that program is aimed at adults, CAP also will offer a barista training program for people ages 16 to 20, according to Alan Rose, CAP's community relations director.

In addition to teaching job skills, the venture also addresses another need: making CAP less dependant on government funding. Under the business plan, Grounds for Opportunity not only will sustain itself from its public restaurant and catering service, it also will generate money to support CAP programs such as Meals on Wheels and Help Warehouse, the clearing house for local food banks.

"On many levels, the timing makes a lot of sense," CAP community services director Michael Torres told The Daily News in September, citing the current state of the economy, lower construction prices, the need for jobs and the increasing population of senior citizens who need meal assistance.

CAP is seeking major benefactors willing to donate large kitchen equipment such as a walk-in cooler and freezer, dishwasher and electric buffet. (See breakout for the Grounds for Opportunity wish list.)

"It's going to be a nice facility. We're excited about it," Torres said.



Bill Wagner / The Daily News - At Friday's groundbreaking ceremony, attendees sampled a lip-smacking array of sweet and savory catering menu items prepared by Lower Columbia CAP's chef, Keven Robinson, who will be the food service industry trainer at Grounds for Opportunity cafe in downtown Kelso