

St. Vincent de Paul's Beans and Bread kicks off expansion

As a line formed Nov. 18 at mealtime outside Beans and Bread, St. Vincent de Paul's day resource center in Fells Point for the homeless, the thermometer struggled to reach the low 40s.

Despite the chill, it was a day of warm celebration for Beans and Bread, which honored donors and formally kicked off a project that will expand and renovate its facility, toward the greater comfort, dignity and overall welfare of its clients.

According to St. Vincent de Paul, the project will "more than double the capacity and square footage of the facility from 7,000 square feet to 14,000 square feet." Despite years of neighborhood opposition, which The Catholic Review reported on in December 2009, the anticipated completion date is December 2012.

John Schiavone, president and CEO of St. Vincent de Paul, said that a new interior queue will "allow clients to have protection from the elements and to wait for services with greater dignity.

Beyond a meal, those participating in case management will have access to new on-site showers and laundry.

"A meal falls into the category of basic needs," Schiavone said. "Without your basic needs met, you're not going to be able to seek employment or housing. The meal is a means of engaging homeless clientele in more advanced services to help them achieve self-sufficiency and a better quality of life."

He explained the idea is to help homeless individuals feel "comfortable enough to seek services."

"A lot of people who are homeless have no idea where to go," explained Glenn Falcao, campaign chairman on the St. Vincent de Paul board. "They lose a little of their dignity, and they're not as apt to get help sometimes."

Falcao believes the Beans and Bread expansion and renovation will further work toward getting people “back into society, back on their feet. We don’t want them to be on welfare forever.”

To that end, Schiavone said, it is “The critical thing expanding is the day resource area.” It will provide offices for counseling and space for partner agencies to deliver their services. There will also be areas for support groups and life skills classes.

“The project will also improve access for people with disabilities by making the facility handicap accessible,” according to a St. Vincent de Paul news release, “and accommodate the growing Home Connections program that provides permanent supportive housing to disabled individuals who had been previously chronically homeless.”

The kick-off event honored donors, including philanthropist Mary Catherine Bunting.

“Her gift really propelled this whole facility,” said Schiavone.

Also honored was Benedictine Sister Eleanor Noll, the coordinator of the meals program at Beans and Bread. Its new dining room will be renamed for Sister Eleanor, whom Schiavone said is “loved by volunteers, staff and guests alike.”

“It’s been a long road,” Schiavone said, “but we’re an organization that is serving people who don’t have a voice. We need to be that voice. We serve those who lack the very connections to other people that are part of the human experience. We heal not only the body but the spirit.”