

CAP officials make another run at restaurant training center

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By Barbara LaBoe

Lower Columbia Community Action Program officials hope the third time will be the charm for a proposed cafe/worker training center in Cowlitz County.

CAP officials have tried to open their Grounds for Opportunity project in two previous locations in Longview. After further investigation, though, those building costs were too high to break even, said CAP executive director Ilona Kerby.

Officials now want to locate it in a former Kelso restaurant. Tuesday, Cowlitz County commissioners gave the project a green light to apply for state Community Development Block Grant money.

The county can forward one project to the state each year that would serve low- to moderate-income residents. There's no guarantee the Cowlitz County project will receive the highly competitive state funding, but commissioners praised the project and its dual goals of helping the unemployed and seniors needing healthy meals.

"This is exciting," Commissioner Kathleen Johnson said. "I think this is one the most innovative programs I've seen."

CAP has an option to buy a vacant 10,000 square-foot building at the corner of Ash and South Pacific streets in downtown Kelso. Once refurbished, the space would provide a permanent kitchen to prepare the Meals on Wheels and senior lunch meals that CAP provides throughout the county.

CAP provides more than 38,000 meals annually to seniors in the county, preparing the meals in rented space.

In addition, the building would host a program to train clients for working in restaurants or coffee shops, in addition to teaching other, overall job skills. CAP is working with the national Kitchens with a Mission group to plan the training and restaurant service aspect, according to the grant application.

A third benefit, Rose said, is the center also would sell lunch and possibly breakfast, adding another eatery to downtown Kelso. Eventually, CAP also would like to offer catering, Rose said.

CAP is asking the state for \$465,000 of the total \$876,000 needed to complete the project. The state money would be used to purchase and refurbish the building. CAP has secured \$330,000 for the project already and also has been invited to apply to the Paul G. Allen Foundation for additional assistance.

If the state awards CAP the money in early 2010, construction would begin that summer and the restaurant/training center would open in late fall, according to CAP's time line.