Dorothy Day project leaders to seek fundraising boost

By Frederick Melo and Maja Beckstrom
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Private donors have raised $23.6 million for the expansion of the Dorothy Day Center in downtown St. Paul, and Gov. Mark Dayton will press lawmakers for more public funding during the 2016 Legislature.

Government and corporate leaders gathered Thursday in downtown St. Paul for the groundbreaking for the Higher Ground St. Paul project -- a shelter and homeless services campus to replace the overcrowded Dorothy Day Center.

Dayton, noting the recent development in downtown St. Paul, said in his remarks at the groundbreaking: "This is so fitting that we set aside this space for the least of these, our brethren."

The overall project has an estimated cost of $100 million -- $60 million is coming from public coffers and $40 million from private. The campaign launched in May with a $5 million lead grant by the Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation.

Construction on the first phase started in August with the demolition of the old Labor & Professional Centre at 411 Main St.

The new five-story, L-shaped shelter will include free bunks and pay-for-stay beds for 278 men and women as well as 193 small, permanent apartments on the upper floors.

"This is God's work," said Doug Baker Jr., chairman and CEO of Ecolab and the campaign's co-chairman. "We've crossed the halfway mark in our campaign. This is a huge compelling need. ... We think this work is so important. The faster we start raising money, the faster these buildings go up."

Catholic Charities CEO Tim Marx noted the themes of Pope Francis' recent U.S. visit.

"Two weeks ago today, Pope Francis visited ... a homeless shelter in Washington, D.C.,” Marx said. "(Pope Francis) said there is no moral justification, no justification whatsoever for the lack of housing."

A second phase of construction would add a job training center and double the housing on the site, Marx said. Both
phases should be completed by 2018.

Catholic Charities, which runs the homeless program, is working to line up $60 million in public funding.

So far, it has secured about $28 million. That amount includes $6 million in state bonds, $19 million from the Minnesota Housing Finance Agency, $1.7 million from Ramsey County as well as a goal of $1 million from the city of St. Paul.

Catholic Charities will return to the Legislature in 2016 to seek an additional $12 million in the state bonding bill. The governor included the additional money in his bonding request last session, but it didn't make the final cut.

Dayton spokesman Matt Swenson didn't say Thursday how much the governor would request from lawmakers during next year's session.

Marx, however, said he plans to ask the Legislature for $12 million in state general obligation bonding again.

"That is our request," he said.

Meanwhile, private support seems strong.

Beyond the initial $5 million Catholic Charities received from the Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation, it also has $2 million from Target; $1 million each from the Frey Foundation and the Pohlad Foundation; and a combined total of $1.1 million from the St. Paul Foundation, F. R. Bigelow Foundation and the Mardag Foundation.

The project has the backing of major corporate leaders in the Twin Cities, including Ecolab CEO Baker, HealthPartners CEO Mary Brainerd and U.S. Bank CEO Andy Cecere.

Bob Perry, 67, a former Rock-Tenn factory worker, said he spends his nights sleeping on a rubber mat at the Dorothy Day Center.

"I think it'll be good," said Perry, referring to expansion plans. "I don't think the people that go by even grasp what this place is. (It) gives us a place to live and sleep and feeds us every day."

The existing Dorothy Day Center, named after a 20th-century New York Catholic social activist, shelters some 250 people each night on mats laid on the floors in a couple of large, noisy rooms. Men and women are separated by a row of folding chairs, and mats have to be carried away for meals.

Catholic Charities and city leaders have long talked about the need for more dignified housing.