Pioneer Press editorial: St. Paul—Vision for new Dorothy Day center takes shape

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The vision for a better way to care for those in need in our community has received an important financial boost -- and a meaningful show of support.

The Ramsey County Board last week approved nearly $1.7 million -- the first local funding -- toward a critical second phase of the project that will replace the overcrowded Dorothy Day Center in downtown St. Paul and improve the services it provides.

It's a development worth noting in the county that, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, has the highest proportion of concentrated areas of financial poverty in the region.

Phase One of the project will replace the existing Dorothy Day Center with a new facility that provides emergency shelter and housing. Full funding is in place and construction is to begin this summer.

Phase Two's Connection Center -- to be located near the new building, with groundbreaking expected by 2017 -- would provide supportive mental and chemical health services, job coaching and more.

The county's investment is a "critical milestone," said Tim Marx, president and CEO of Catholic Charities, the nonprofit that operates the facility. It will help the project continue to build public-private partnerships "that will allow us to complete an excellent and transformative project for downtown St. Paul."

The center is named for the journalist and activist who in the 1930s helped establish the Catholic Worker Movement to aid the poor.

What's ahead for St.Paul is "a little campus," said Matt Kramer, president of the St. Paul Area Chamber of Commerce, and a Catholic Charities board member. Facilities will be state-of-the-art, with a strong emphasis on the dignity of the client and "very successful, because we're going to have this suite of services" to address health, employment and other needs.

The vision is a strong one, said County Board Chair Jim McDonough, one that can "really have an impact on homelessness."

The County Board felt strongly that we "needed to come out early" to make clear support for the second phase, McDonough said.

The county will lease space in the connection facility to enable its staff members who provide mental health, chemical dependency, employment and other assistance to "be right there to provide direct services."

That model is what's "needed here to help have an impact," McDonough said, noting that service will be more direct because we're "right there" when clients are coming through the door. The county will have a 10-year lease for space for 14 to 17 staff members.

Together, the vision for the two buildings near the heart of downtown make a powerful statement from a community that cares about those in need.

It's a vision worth realizing.