

TEACHING THE NEXT GENERATION



JOHN J. WATKINS, THE TIMES

Mike Jessen, president and CEO of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Northwest Indiana, helps member Camryn try out her newly constructed marshmallow gun.

Construction at Gary Tolleston Hub brings kids industry lessons

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For middle schoolers attending an after-school program at the Gary Boys and Girls Club, ongoing construction on the building has provided an opportunity to learn from the tradespeople working nearby.

The former Tolleston Middle School building, which houses the Boys and Girls Club, is in the midst of a \$40 million transformation and expansion – a mammoth undertaking funded with contributions from the City of Gary, the Indiana Economic Development Corporation and the Dean and Barbara White Family Foundation.

Slated for completion next summer, the

new “Tolleston Opportunity Hub” will see a revamped Boys and Girls Club combined with a new YMCA facility and a Methodist Hospitals wellness center. Chicago-based Powers & Sons Construction and Berglund Construction are collaborating on the project, which will include two swimming pools, three basketball courts and a 4,400-square-foot weight training area.

“We envision that a lot of the members of the Y will be families, and when the mom, dad, whoever, comes to work out, they can send the kids over to the club while they’re doing that, which would be a great

Please see YMCA, Page A6



JOHN J. WATKINS PHOTOS, THE TIMES

A pre-school early learning area for the new YMCA is under construction at the Tolleston Opportunity Hub in Gary.

YMCA

From A1

opportunity,” Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Northwest Indiana President and CEO Mike Jessen told The Times, adding that he expects that his organization and the separately run YMCA will take advantage of opportunities to share space and resources.

Saul Alvarez, an assistant project manager with Powers & Sons, estimated that some 50 tradespeople are on site each day as crews work to enclose the new structure before winter weather arrives in earnest. Electrical wiring, mechanical work and dry-wall will follow. Renovations to the Boys and Girls Club are set to wrap by the start of June — Jessen said that program attendees will be temporarily bused to the organization’s site in Lake Station while the work is underway — and the new YMCA is expected to open in August.

The proximity of the construction site has made some after-school program attendees curious about the work being done, sparking an idea for a collaboration. At biweekly meetings of the Boys and Girls Club’s CONSTRUCT club, Alvarez has been teaching a group of around a dozen children about his industry’s fundamentals.

“When it first got pitched, it was just kind of like, ‘Hey, we can kind of explain to them what’s happening on the construction site,’” he told The Times. “And then it kind of involved into us more teaching them some basic skills and a basic overview



Boys and Girls Club member Roy, 13, checks out his marshmallow gun that he and fellow members built from PVC pipe.

of what construction is and how they could fit inside of it.”

Each interactive lesson, held in an unfinished section of the building that Alvarez and his colleagues are using as an office, covers a different construction-related topic. Some have involved special guests.

At a Nov. 20 meeting of the club, Bill Virgin, a training coordinator with Plumbers Local 210, fielded questions from the students about plumbing and about his experiences in the trade. Virgin explained the purpose of the U-shaped “p-trap” in an under-sink pipe, which fills with water to prevent sewer gases from escaping, and recalled a harrowing experience with “cockroaches running around all over the place” during a job at a prison.

For the lesson’s hands-on

component, Virgin and Alvarez showed the club’s members how to assemble a breath-powered marshmallow launcher from sections of PVC pipe. Alvarez demonstrated how to safely employ a ratcheting pipe cutter, and the students set to work measuring, cutting and assembling their contraptions.

Jessen is excited to see the Opportunity Hub, the product of a years-long planning process, finally come to fruition.

“We have people today that would see all this and still question whether or not we’re going to pull it off,” he said, indicating the new addition’s steel framing and the recently poured concrete bottom of a swimming pool. “We’re convinced it’ll be the start of what else will happen around this area for development.”