

Community Cooperation Creates Training Center at Tripp School

In the words of Dr. David Askew, Regional Director of the state Department of Mental Health, Fairhaven's Tripp School project is a "remarkable effort" which has "no parallel in the Commonwealth." The school, now undergoing extensive renovation, will be the site of a state-funded skills training center for young, mentally retarded adults.

Askew credited George Graves of Fairhaven with generating the idea for the program, which will be funded for the first year by a \$125,000 grant from the DMH. The state agency, Askew said, was impressed by the concept of a training program for "over-22" clients, who "graduate" from Chapter 766 state assistance when they reach 22 years of age and "have nowhere else to go." Askew said the DMH went to the legislature to see if the agency and the lawmakers could help Fairhaven organizers set up the program in the Job C. Tripp School, which was closed three years ago.

State Sen. William Q. MacLean, Jr., on hand for the Monday morning ceremonies, said that he and Graves would be sending a letter to people in the area who would like to be part of the program. No state or town funds will be used to maintain the project, MacLean said, and none of the grant money has been earmarked for repairs of capital improvements. The extensive repairs completed to date have been accomplished using donated materials and labor.

MacLean said the project will use the "tax deductible" number of the New Bedford Mental Health area to allow funds to be donated. Cash donations can be made through ARC (Association for Retarded Citizens) to the "Tripp School Project" in care of George Graves, Vice President of Lending, Fairhaven Savings Bank, 215 Washington Street, Fairhaven MA 02719. "This is not just a Fairhaven program," MacLean said, "It's a Southeastern Massachusetts program, and we want it to be the single best program in the state."

The program still needs volunteers for a cleanup of the Tripp School building, for which Fairhaven firefighters have already volunteered their time.

The Nemasket Group, of Middleboro, will lease the building from the town and will run the program from their new base of operations, the former nurse's office in the Bridge Street School. Louis Nisenbaum, executive director of Nemasket, said that the "special needs professionals" in the group "have strong feelings about" what happens to young retarded adults at the end of Chapter 766 assistance, and "will try to prove that the old stereotypes (about mental retardation) can be changed." Nemasket, Nisenbaum said, is a state-recognized, private, non-profit organization funded by the state Department of Mental Health.

The Nemasket Group, Nisenbaum said, was specifically created to act as vendor for the Fairhaven project. Graves said that Nemasket was selected over other bidders because of the enthusiasm its members showed about the program, and because Nemasket had no other projects which would divert its energies from the Tripp School program.

Although Tripp School will offer "essentially vocational" training, Nisenbaum hopes to integrate the young people into work situations within the community, using the school as a center. His excitement about the project, he said, stemmed from "a sense of openness in this community" to the needs of the mentally retarded young people the project will serve.

MacLean said that the program will begin in early February with 20 students, although 78 young people have already been identified as eligible for services. Another 35 students will join the program next year. Many of the students will be Fairhaven residents, MacLean said, but the

program will service an area from Dartmouth to Buzzards Bay. He said he hopes the legislature will increase the grant for the program from \$300,000 to \$400,000 next year.

Phillip J. Tully, Director of Mental Health Services of DMH, and Dr. Askew, in awarding the contract for the program to Nemasket, said the program will be unique in its approach to training the mentally retarded to work at occupations already in place in the Greater New Bedford area.

Graves said that "the wonderful part of this real exciting moment is the cooperation of the townspeople – the selectmen, the school department – right down the line." Graves said that if passersby see the lights on at the school on Tuesday and Thursday nights, they will know that 20 students of Local 77, the plumbers' and steamfitters' union, are at work on the building's heating system. A new burner and parts for the heating system were donated, as well as handicapped toilets and urinals, which cost \$300 each. Students from Greater New Bedford Regional Vocational Technical High School will do the carpentry and painting, and wiring and electrical work will be donated by students from Old Colony Regional.

"It's wonderful, the way these young men have pitched in," Graves said.

The School will require front and rear wheelchair access ramps, which Warren Bros. (Tilcon Massachusetts, Inc. of Acushnet) will donate to the program. Graves said that Warren Bros. also volunteered to rip up and replace the damaged sidewalk at the school.

Graves acknowledged that "the Senator has given us a lift" by helping to get the grant funding through the legislature, and said that he and MacLean will seek additional funds for materials from area businessmen. The school roof should be replaced, Graves said.