

# Volunteer shaping up Tripp School for new career as training center

FAIRHAVEN – The Job C. Tripp School is getting a new lease on life – thanks to the efforts of many area residents and businesses, but more help is needed.

The former elementary school, closed in 1981 because of declining school enrollments, will reopen by mid-February as the site of a new state-funded vocational skills training center for mentally retarded adults.

“It’s been a very remarkable effort,” said David Askew, New Bedford area director for the state Department of Mental Health, referring to cooperation by people in addition to state and local governments.

The state this week provided a \$125,000 contract to a Middleboro organization, the Nemasket Group, to operate the center. It will serve 20 mentally retarded adults age 22 and older in its first year of operation. Funding is expected to jump to \$196,000 in the center’s second year, when it hopes to serve 30 to 35 clients.

## A recognized need

Louis Nisenbaum, executive director of the Nemasket Group, toured the school earlier this week with state and local officials. He said plans are already being formed to work with community groups to prepare for the center’s opening.

Chapter 766, the state legislation which provides education for special needs students such as the retarded, does not cover them beyond age 21 but there has been a recognized need for education beyond that point.

The center would fill that void. It is expected to draw clients from Dartmouth to Buzzards Bay.

Said Sen. William Q. MacLean Jr., D-Fairhaven, who was instrumental in obtaining operating funds from the state, “It’s a good use of the school and it is really serving a community need.”

MacLean noted that 78 people have been identified within the training area as being able to

benefit from such a program.

Local supporters have embarked on a drive for local contributions and volunteer labor needed to help ready the building at the Green and Bridge Streets for its new future.

## School is available

“One of the biggest undertakings is getting people to do repairs to the building,” said Fairhaven banker George Graves. The Fairhaven School Department has made the school available but capital improvements funds will have to be raised publicly.

Contributions, which are tax deductible, can be made in the name of the Association of Retarded Citizens of Greater New Bedford – Tripp School Project, through Graves at the Fairhaven Savings Bank.

Graves helped generate the idea of establishing such a program to serve Southeastern Massachusetts. Graves – who has a mentally retarded son of his own – and MacLean say \$30,000 in materials are needed to convert the school to a skills training center.

According to Graves, boiler repairs have been needed to get the school’s heating system back in shape; toilet facilities need improvement, including installation of toilets for the handicapped; the interior and exterior of the school needs painting; handicapped access ramps and sidewalk repairs are needed and the school could use a new roof.

Many businesses and organizations already have offered support.

## Workers donate time

The Plumbers and Steamfitters Union’s school has donated time to work on the heating system. The Greater New Bedford Regional Vocational Technical High School has agreed to provide carpentry work. The Old Colony Regional Vocational High School will be doing electrical work. Tilcon – Massachusetts has

agreed to install ramps and take care of sidewalks. Town hall firefighters have volunteered to clean up the site when work is completed.

The Babbitt Steam Specialty Co. has donated a new burner and the former Milhench Inc. has donated pipes and other materials.

Nisenbaum this week noted that the Nemasket Group will work with community groups this fall in advance of the opening to help create an effective program for the center. The Nemasket Group will locate its offices at the center. He said the center will probably have staff of eight.

On-site training will be just one component of the vocational skill training program. The center also will seek off-site training periods with the hope of placing clients in productive jobs.

## Specialized Support

For instance, Nisenbaum noted, if it is feasible for a client to work on a carpentry crew, the center would assign a staff member for some hands-on experience and frame a general training program for the student and provide specialized support for the client.

Nisenbaum, who spent several years working in the Southeastern Massachusetts Collaborative, formerly “Project Orient,” which provides specialized support educational services for several area schools, is one of four individuals who formed the Nemasket Group earlier this year as a non-profit agency dealing with students with challenging disabilities.

Other involved in the group include Eileen Whiteside, a private rehabilitation occupational therapist; James Linehan, former community director of the spinal cord injury center at University Hospital in Boston, and Ruth Cornstock, a psychotherapist.