

THE LIVINGSTON

ENTERPRISE

Senior Center improves building's ventilation

By *Elias Baer* - Enterprise photos by Elias Baer

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Isaac Carroll, an employee with Rick's Refrigeration, climbs down from the newly installed ventilation system after placing it above the Senior Center entrance Wednesday as a member of the center's community enters the building.



Becky Bird, executive director for the Park County Senior Citizens Center sits outside the center Thursday morning.

With the aid of relief funds and grants, as well as some community contributions, the Park County Senior Citizen Center installed a new ventilation system in the 102-year-old building.

The fresh air system is the first of a number of renovations at the senior center aimed at improving the quality of life and health conditions in the building funded by a generous package of grants and two loans.

“The new ventilation system was (partially) funded by the Park County Community Foundation (PCCF) COVID Resiliency grants,” said Becky Bird, executive director of the PCSCC. “We put in a request for fresh air ventilation because, obviously, in a 100-year old building ventilation just means opening a window.”

The new ventilation system cost \$16,445.42, \$12,972.36 of which was funded by the PCCF COVID Resiliency Fund, leaving \$3,473.06 for the PCSCC to finance through other accounts.

Bird said that COVID has been an eye-opener. Now, she said PCSCC staff, residents and the broader community have all learned more about the importance of hygiene and fresh air.

“It’s cool, because COVID has at least shown us what a little bit of fresh air can do,” she said. “This new ventilation system means we can be a true community center. It would be hard to justify holding indoor, congregant events with seniors in a place without fresh air, where their health might be at risk.”

Installations of the unit, which was specifically made for the space above the Main Street entrance, began on Wednesday morning, and should be completed by Friday afternoon.

Isaac Carroll and Tristen Killian, employees of local company Rick’s Refrigeration, spent Wednesday morning heaving the ventilation system into a small loft above the front door.

Carroll explained that the system “is kind of like an air recycler. It takes stale air and cycles it outside, then takes fresh air and pulls it inside.”

The unit is intended to circulate air throughout any part of the building that is publicly accessible, which doesn’t include the second and third floor, where there are apartments for senior housing.

The new system will circulate air through all of the ground level, including the Senior Center offices, reception area, activities room and lobby area.

“The aim is to get public areas ready for public consumption,” Bird said. “We don’t want to be part of the problem.”

For a community of seniors spending as many as eight months out of the year primarily indoors, and often in the PCSCC building, Bird said this new ventilation will be a big game changer, both now and after the pandemic has run its course.

The PCSCC received a total of \$154,555.84 through a package of six grants, two loans and one community contribution.

The PCCF grant money was specifically awarded the PCSCC to fix the ventilation system, and since it didn’t quite cover the cost, the remainder will have to be financed through the senior center’s various accounts, according to Bird.

PCCF awarded PCSCC \$16,445.42 for the project, but the final cost for the ventilation system was \$12,972.36, leaving a \$3,473.06 remainder for PCSCC to finance.

With the ventilation project nearing completion, PCSCC is eyeing other projects to spend remaining grant money on.

We have been, and continue to use a lot of this money for operational expenses, the day-to-day stuff, like utilities and paying employees.” Bird said.

Since the center’s normal river of cash flow has been dammed up by the pandemic, this grant money is a godsend for the PCSCC staff.

Bird said that PCSCC can't hold fundraising events, as it would on a normal year, and on top of that donations are down substantially since the start of the pandemic.

"We'll ultimately be replacing the ceiling fans as well," Bird said. "People might wonder why we need fans if we have this new ventilation, but the high ceilings in here require fans to aid the vent system in pushing the air down and keeping it moving."

PCSCC also plans to begin focusing their attention and funds on their new and improved sanitation regimen.

"We have 38,700 square feet in this building and a vacuum from Walmart just won't cut it," Bird said. "Since the building is so big and there is so much cleaning to do, we want to make sure we have the right tools to get it all done."

The Staying Connected Grant, part of the Montana CARES act, granted PCSCC \$2,000, which Bird said she plans to use on a projector and possibly a retractable screen, but that it's "all up in the air still."

"We want the projector for online streaming and showing movies," Bird said. "We're also looking at getting some desktop computers. I'd like some on the second floor in the resident lounge."

The Senior Center desperately needs to replace its boiler, according to Bird, and PCSCC is still working on funding that project.

"The boiler was used when we got it, I think we bought it from one of the schools, and I don't know exactly how long it's been in here, but I'd say between 15 and 20 years now," Bird said.

"We raised some money through Give a Hoot to replace our boiler," Bird said. "It's a good start, but we still have a ways to go."

The community contribution and match provided by Give-a-Hoot totaled \$10,757.48, which Bird thinks is a good start, although she has yet to have an estimate on the replacement boiler.

Bird said she plans to tap into the Small Business Association Economic Injury Disaster loan, amounting \$70,800 to help cover the final cost of the boiler.

Because of relief funding, the center was finally able to afford a solar exhaust system, a project they'd put off for over a year due to financial issues.

"We had our solar exhaust system put in this summer," Bird said. "This year, because of COVID, we were granted the money to make it happen."

For now, life at PCSCC looks nothing like it did in years past. Pretty much all of the community gathering has ceased, and the center can't really host any of its normal activities or

programming, but the PCSCC staff is doing everything it can to get the building ready to return to normal.

“For many of these older people, the walls are closing in on them,” Bird said. “It feels like they never left winter, since this all started last March and March is basically winter in Montana, and now they’re headed right back into winter. They never got to enjoy a real summer or spring because they were stuck inside.”

The center since lockdown

The Senior Center has been something of a ghost town in recent months, with the majority of the PCSCC community among the highest risk for contracting and struggling to beat coronavirus.

“Since March 16 I think it was, this is pretty much what it’s looked like,” Bird said, pointing around the empty building. “Normally, this time of day, this time of year, we’d have somewhere between 30 and 50 people in here lining up for lunch.”

Thursday morning the Senior center was completely empty but for Bird, one of her co-workers behind a receptionist desk and a contractor working on the project.

“It’s been really strange working in a senior center without seniors,” Bird said. “Part of our mission is to provide a place for community members to congregate. Most of the people who work here came here for that energy and sense of community, which is, unfortunately, absent.”

Every-other Wednesday PCSCC livens up a bit, as the center puts on its one and only community event, and it’s not exactly a fun activity either: bi-weekly foot service.

“Foot service is really the only ongoing service we’re providing,” Bird said. “It’s really important, and that’s why we’re still doing it. The health of our seniors’ feet can indicate much larger problems, especially for those suffering with diabetes.”

Bird expressed a growing concern for what she perceives as a lack of public awareness of PCSCC going on and hopes that people throughout Livingston can begin to see that the center is still alive and well, even if it might look a bit different.

“Just because we’re not open I don’t want the community to think we don’t exist,” Bird said. “We are here. We are working. We just aren’t interacting with the community or the public the same way as we have in the past. Just because we’re not doing what we used to do doesn’t mean we aren’t still looking at the things we can do.”