

Despite naysayers, city's old armory lives

By Lisa Laney
Journal writer

A year ago, there were many who said it couldn't be done.

Estimates for repairing and rehabilitating the former National Guard armory at 150 N. Indiana Ave. in Kankakee were about \$250,000.

Tack on the high costs of utilities and staffing the structure and the odds seemed against it.

But the odds didn't daunt a small group of people. And in the past year, the small group has grown from four groups to more than 50 persons and organizations.

Since its doors opened Jan. 1, thousands of people have seen the beautiful, old building's walls from the inside; pounded the gymnasium floor with volleyballs, basketballs and soccer balls; tapped on the community room floor to the beat of a Big Band-era orchestra; learned karate and aikwondo; and gathered for meetings, forums, political debates, rallies, discussions, parties, piano and art sales, Uno games, educational and youth fairs — whatever of the unlimited attractions a community center might hold.

And then there are a few who now use rooms at the Community Resource Center for offices.

So far, that includes Family Reunification Services Inc., one of the original partners in the project, and the Kankakee County Tenants Organization.

In the last six months, some 200 persons have donated more than 5,000 hours of labor. Some of those persons did the work as part of their community service requirements through the Kankakee County Probation Department.

"In instance after instance, community service workers came back to work on their own time," said

Charles Betterton, a member of the Kankakee County Community Development Corp. board, which has assumed responsibility for the building from Kankakee Development Corp.

Betterton says the CDC is considering hiring some of the workers part-time "because they were such good workers.

"One of the things that's happening here is that people are discovering that community service is an honor and a privilege," he said.

During the past year, the Kankakee County CDC has increased its board membership from four active members to 20, and created an advisory board with 33 persons representing more than 40 local organizations. The organization is preparing to hire a building manager, adds Betterton.

These are no small accomplishments. They were at least enough to win the project third place in the Governor's Home Town Award competition.

So it's with the roughest part of the road to success already traversed that Bill Lucek, until recently the CDC president, has stepped down from that post.

Filling the position will be Walter J. Charlton, former president and chairman of First Trust and Savings Bank (now First of America).

Betterton told the CDC executive board recently that efforts also are underway to enlist VISTA volunteers to help manage the building and supervise programs.

A large-scale, self-employment training program will begin in the fall, being taught by national authorities Dr. Steven Balkin of Roosevelt University and Beverly Smith, executive director of the Chicago-based Association for Enterprise Opportunity.

That fits with what Betterton defines as the purpose of the building:



Turning the once-vacant National Guard armory at 150 N. Indiana Ave. into Kankakee's Community Resource Center won third place in this year's Governor's Home Town Award competition. At the presentation, from left, are Charles Betterton of the Community Economic Development Resource Cen-

ter; Susie Brown, executive director of United Way of Kankakee County; Gov. Jim Edgar; Bill Lucek, past president of the Kankakee County Community Development Corp.; and Tim Schmidt, executive director of Kankakee Development Corp.

"A place where we can teach people how to fish instead of giving fish for a day."

There also is a possibility that the Dr. King Memorial Library may find a home at the Community Resource Center, and that the CDC will replace Kankakee's Community Development Agency as sponsor of the Affordable Housing Program, which is now focused on North St. Joseph Avenue.

Betterton also commented on the cooperation the city is now showing

the project, without commenting on past friction with former Mayor Russell Johnson.

It's believed that Johnson had wanted to use the former armory as a central fire station, resulting in a lack of commitment of Community Development Block Grant money to the project.

"Mayor Don Green is looking for ways to benefit this project," Betterton told the board. "He is truly and sincerely committed."

On the financial side, Betterton

says the organizations using the building will bring in enough revenue to "be self-sustaining from now on."

However, remaining rehabilitation costs are about \$150,000, he says. That means the capital fund-raising drive will roll on.

The city of Kankakee also has come through with a variety of grants — both for the rehab, including \$50,000 for an elevator and handicapped-accessible restrooms, and for social service groups, which include money for programs and rent.