

HRA secures bond for school renovation

By Scott Whipple
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NEW BRITAIN — The Human Resources Agency of New Britain, together with the Department of Social Services and the Connecticut Health and Education Facilities Authority, took the final necessary step in the bond closing on Tuesday, making funds available for renovations to Benjamin Franklin School.

Rocco Tricarico, HRA's executive director, said his staff "worked relentlessly last year to make sure we successfully reached this point. We're all going to take a deep breath, then move into the renovation and building stage."

In August, HRA acquired \$8.2 million in bond money to add 107 preschool slots in the city.

HRA raised \$2.2 million in matching dollars to make the renovations a reality. The money will pay for renovation of the 86-year-old school building at 180 Clinton St.

"Historically, HRA has not reached out to the community for financial support of its programming, but when we did for this project, the communi-

ty proudly responded in support of quality pre-school education," said Kelly Knox, HRA's director of planning and development. Knox added that as the project moves forward, he's "confident the support we have seen will continue to grow."

Tricarico said the DSS/CHEFA will help create a safe and comfortable learning place for New Britain's youngest by adding 16,000 to 18,000 square feet to the building, and improving the efficiency of the classrooms. The existing facility, while structurally sound, had physical problems which impacted operations of early childhood education programs. The renovation is expected to increase early childhood education slots in the city while renovating aging structures in the building.

According to Tricarico, the renovation is a community project managed by HRA. "The potential of a positive impact on the future of the city of New Britain is undeniable," he said. "Quality early childhood education (ECE) eliminates many risk factors associated with adult poverty. Children who attend quality ECE have less teen-pregnancies,

graduate from high school with more frequency and are more likely to attend college. By increasing the ECE slots, more of New Britain's youngest will get a positive start to their education."

"Quality pre school has the potential to change the future economics of this city," said Paul Catanzaro, president of HRA's board of directors. "Financial investments made in preparing our young children to learn produce extraordinary returns on investment, both economically and socially."

In 2002, only 47 percent of preschool-age children attended preschool in New Britain; the state average was 76 percent. In May, Mayor Timothy Stewart and HRA hammered out an agreement to allow the nonprofit organization to purchase its building from the city for \$325,000. Stewart said he approached Tricarico about selling the building after discovering the city spent more on upkeep for the building than it received in lease payments.

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