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Gifts aid center for gays

*Donations continue to pour into Ferndale for construction of the \$5.3 million facility.
The Detroit News*

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FERNDALE -- The move planned for Metro Detroit's only gay community center is a short one, but the transformation should be enormous.

Thanks in part to three \$250,000 donations from Detroit's Big Three automakers, leaders of Affirmations Lesbian and Gay Community Center say they're on track to build the largest gay community center in the Midwest, about 50 yards west of its current home on Nine Mile and Woodward.

"It's been the world's longest project, and the fact that it's becoming a reality is really exciting," said Affirmations director Leslie Ann Thompson, who called the Big Three "ardent supporters" of Affirmations. "But we certainly didn't expect the gifts would be as large as they are."

The last of the Big Three's donations arrived in December, courtesy of DaimlerChrysler AG, but the gifts from the auto giants weren't the largest.

A Birmingham couple, Allan Gilmour and Eric Jirgens, donated \$500,000; the Arcus Foundation contributed \$450,000; a Plymouth couple, Nancy Katz and Margo Bichtelmiller, and the Non-profit Facility Center each donated \$250,000.

All told, Affirmations has raised \$3.8 million and another \$1 million in pledges, bringing it within reach of its \$5.3 million fund-raising goal for the new center.

"They will draw thousands of people annually to the facility, but what's really important to me is this indicates the Metro region is working hard to embrace diversity," said Ferndale City Manager Tom Barwin.

Plans for the 18,000-square-foot center, announced Tuesday, call for a rooftop garden, cyber cafe, art gallery, a two-story gym, a library and media center. There will also be a stage for cultural events.

Affirmations, the largest gay organization in Michigan, hosts numerous community activities, including movie nights and dance classes, from a 7,000-square-foot facility in Ferndale.

"I've taken advantage of Affirmation services for about a year now," said Randy Gilchrist, 52, of Ypsilanti, a landscape contractor. "They were instrumental in helping me come out and understand myself."

"The facilities there now are quite old and outdated and not large enough to handle the services and programs they have. So, it's wonderful to see them going into a new building custom-designed to fit their needs."

What's next?

Affirmations Lesbian and Gay Community Center is scheduled to break ground on a new community center in Ferndale this spring and open a year from now.

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