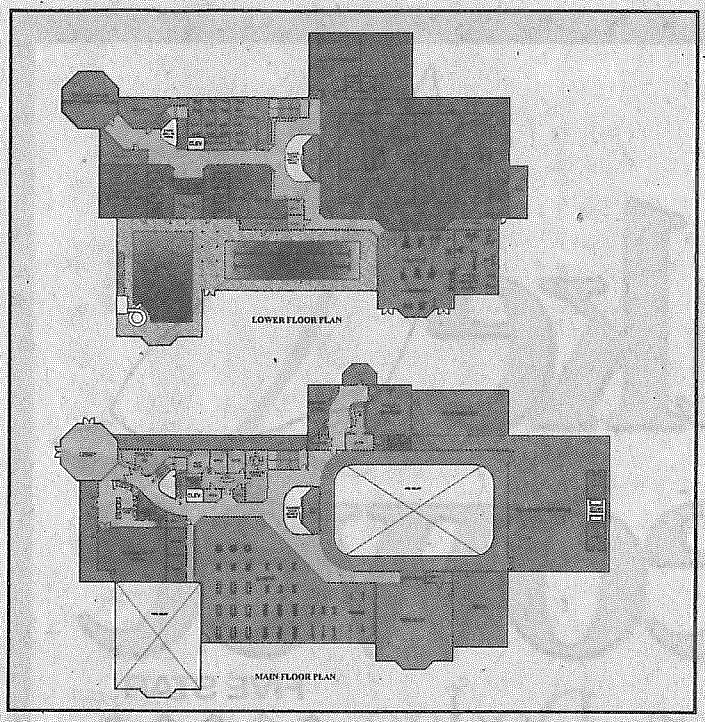


Special to the Daily Journal/Messenger

These renderings show floorplans for the Foothills YMCA project planned for the Keowee River facility.

New YMCA to locate in development

By GREG OLIVER
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SENECA — Dreams can come true — just ask officials and board members representing the Foothills Area Family YMCA.

Two years after the local organization found itself on the national YMCA's termination list, its future has never been brighter. Thursday, plans for the construction of a three-level, 60,000 square foot indoor facility were unveiled at its future site on S.C. Highway 130, north of Seneca.

"It's going to be an opportunity to have more programs and tourism events," said Charles Baker, president of the Foothills YMCA Board. "It's going to be a great opportunity to build into the future and will provide a lot of benefits for everyone in the area, especially the children."

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Plans for the YMCA project, which will be built in a Lake Hartwell cove that is part of a proposed 774-acre development, include an lap swimming pool, a family splash area with a slide and other water features geared toward children; a gymnasium with an indoor walking track suspended above, a fitness area and a child care area to assist individuals working out or using any aspect of the facility.

Because of its lake access, the Y will still have opportunities for waterfront activities and water sports.

"One of our goals is for all third-grade children in the area to learn how to swim," Baker said. "We believe this facility will offer one of many opportunities for that to happen."

The Keowee River Preservation Group is the developer for the project and Baker said the YMCA is working under a budget of $7 million for the new facility. So far, he said the organization has received matching pledges of $3.4 million and believes that community support will enable the financial aspect of the project to move along smoothly.

"It's still going to take total community support," Baker said, adding, "We will need the community to unite as one."

Foothills Y Executive Director Anna Connelly said groundbreaking is expected to take place in the spring of 2010, followed by a 12- to 18-month construction period.

"The field space is such that we can have outdoor programs even if the facility is not completed," Connelly said.

Y officials say their office will be located at the new facility, but are hopeful of establishing satellite locations at their current facility on S.C. Highway 93, as well as near Walhalla and Westminster. Clemson University is managing the current Y facility and has plans to improve the property and access for students.

Connelly admits that she has had to pinch herself when reflecting what the future now holds for the Christian-based organization.

"I've been with the YMCA for a long time and it's great to see this dream come to fruition," Connelly said, adding, "This community has deserved it for a long time and we're happy to provide the opportunity for them."

Longtime YMCA board member Bud Webb admits that there were times he thought the organization would never emerge from its financial abyss. But the smile on Webb's face Thursday was brighter than the hot sunshine beaming over the gathering of some 300 people.

"It's just fantastic," Webb said. "I don't know of a better word to describe it. Now we've got to get the community to buy into the Y, and I believe that's going to happen."