

YMCA targeting Monroe for new location

Andrew Kenneson | The Tribune | Posted: Saturday, April 21, 2018 12:00 am

Back in 2007, a group of citizens around Monroe wanted to build a YMCA. The multi-purpose Christian charities dot the country, offering gyms, pools, food, camps, classes and more to their members. The group thought that Monroe needed one.

Then the market crashed. Y's are community-funded projects, and all the energy and money around the idea evaporated. Now, almost a decade later, a new committee is closer than ever to bringing a YMCA to Monroe.

Lee Rowell, a local real estate developer, leads the committee. He grew up around a Y in the Atlanta area, and he's been trying to bring a Y to Monroe ever since he moved here. They have help from Angie Putman, the executive director of the Winder Y and CEO of YMCA of Georgia Piedmont, the umbrella organization that includes the Winder, Hartwell, and if built, the Monroe locations.

Starting a Y is an arduous process. The national YMCA has dozens of stops that every new group has to follow. One of these steps is a feasibility and needs assessment, which shows what the demand for a Y is, and what kind of facilities would be best.

The local committee recently completed this part, surveying 597 people in the Monroe area, asking them what holes the Y could possibly fill in the community. Two needs overwhelmingly stood out. One was to have a place where families could gather. The other was a pool.

Soon, the local committee will meet with national representatives with the results of this study to seek advice for how to proceed. One of the benefits of working with a national organization is that they have data on how hundreds of Y's have been built and maintained in all sorts of situations. Whatever problems might arise on the road to building a Y in Monroe, there's a good chance a Y elsewhere has dealt with them.

Maybe the biggest thing to decide is how big of a facility to build. Rowell has donated 15 acres of land right across from Monroe Area High School to the cause. He and Putman estimate the building could be around 30,000 feet, but are open to other options.

But regardless of how big it ends up being, it will probably not be built all at once. Depending on fundraising, one part of the Y would be built first, probably the gym and maybe some sports fields, and then other parts would come later, as more money comes in. Once the Y has established itself, they can make more serious investments.

One of those serious investments would be a pool. Rowell and the survey say a pool would be an essential part of the Y, but pools are expensive. The Winder Y has an indoor, six lane, 25 yard pool, as well as a more recreational focused outdoor one. The price tag for the indoor pool was well over \$1 million. Rowell estimates that a pool in Monroe would cost somewhere around \$1.8 million.

All that money must be donated from the community. Up until now, all the money the group in Monroe has raised has gone toward funding the feasibility and needs studies. But Putman and Rowell agree the Monroe

group is almost to start “real” fundraising. Only then, as money and interest build, will they know what kind of shape the Y in Monroe will take.

But the group wants to do more than raise money right now. One thing the national YMCA recommends is running programs in a community before breaking ground on a Y building. That’s what’s happening this summer in the Highland Creek subdivision in Monroe.

The Y has run swim lessons out of the pool in the subdivision, which Rowell helped build, for years.

The lessons have typically drawn 60 to 80 kids every summer. This summer they will ramp up those efforts by adding a swim team, which will compete around the area.

The Y committee hopes the team will build interest around the Monroe area for the possibilities a Y could offer. And those possibilities, Putman said, could be numerous. “Here in Winder, we have programs for people ages one to 90. We could potentially do the same in Monroe.”

Rowell emphasizes the family values and community space the Y would offer. “Hopefully we can make a impact,” he said, “That’s what we’re trying to do.”