

# HAYC3 seeks Hoosick armory suggestions

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HOOSICK FALLS, N.Y. -- It will take many stakeholders to fill as large a space as the 23,684-square-foot Hoosick Falls armory, according to the staff and volunteers of the local non-profit seeking the building.

A meeting at the armory next month will brainstorm uses and invite the public to plan for the envisioned community hub.

"The idea is community buy-in," said Amanda Haar, coalition chairwoman for the Hoosick Area Youth Center and Community Coalition, the nonprofit currently in the process of obtaining the armory through special legislation. "That everyone has contributed an idea, and understands the space."

From case studies of other excessed armories, HAYC3 Executive Director Aelish Nealon said other successful nonprofits that have run armories have done so cooperatively with community support. "They haven't done it alone."

"Some people have bought (armories) and made them into tennis courts. ... Maybe that's viable. Maybe that's financially viable, but to me, it's not interesting," said Nealon, in a recent Banner interview with staff and volunteers at HAYC3's 115 Church St. youth center.

"What my buy-in was ... when we were talking, one of the things that became very clear for me was we weren't saying, 'HAYC3 wanted the building for us.' We really wanted it for the community," Nealon continued. "And we saw that the potential for HAYC3 is to just be one of the nonprofits. Maybe HAYC3 was the nonprofit that was the caretaker for the building. ... So you have a huge space, and (you're) saying yes to anybody."

Concurrent bills authorizing the Office of General Services to convey the armory to the non-profit were introduced earlier this month in the state Assembly and Senate, following a unanimous vote of support May 8 from the Hoosick town board. Votes on the Senate and Assembly floor are expected in June at the end of the legislative session.

Finding parallels between the armory and the youth center, which will be marking 60 years as a hub for youth in the community in 2013, Nealon said there was a part of her unafraid of taking ownership of the historic military structure. "We'll do what we've done here," she said, speaking to transformative change with the youth center in the past eight years. "We can use the same muscle."

"We're lucky with what we have here," said Patti Zilinskas, community liaison. "And then if we can build on that with the armory for (adults), that would be a wonderful thing."

While the town had expressed interest in the armory following the National Guard's departure early last year -- the town offices remain at the armory in a rental situation dating to the mid-1990s -- town board members ultimately deferred responsibility for the building.

Opponents of the town's ownership cited high maintenance and utility costs, Americans with Disabilities Act noncompliance, and unknown variables with an underground oil tank and lead and asbestos. With a fraction of the financial resources and a large percentage of grant-sourced revenue, Nealon points to successes at the youth center when questioned about HAYC3's wherewithal to support the 123-year-old armory.

"We've been asked that question from year one," she said. "And, as a nonprofit, small, rural organization, we've been in the black for four or five years now."

HAYC3 reports an annual operating budget of roughly \$250,000, with fully half of that coming from the Drug Free Communities Support Program, a federal grant run on a 5-year cycle. Nealon said her organization sustained itself through 2010, adding programming in the process, in a one-year interval when the nonprofit did not receive that funding.

The nonprofit's board is currently looking to diversify revenues before the end of the current Drug Free grant in 2015, in part through a greater annual appeal drive and planned giving program.

"We really have a smart board (and) a smart staff who are willing to spend the extra hours to problem solve in creative ways," said Nealon.

The community brainstorming session Wednesday, June 6, begins at 5 p.m. and will ask all participants to share their visions for the armory.

It will also serve as opportunity to re-introduce the organization and address some misconceptions.

"With the armory, I think a misconception is we're going to move the youth center into the armory," said Jason Jansen, the community outreach staffer at HAYC3, who described his vision of a "revitalized" space that addressed modern needs in the community.

"Not dancing to the radio and rollerskating, but food co-ops. We're looking at artisan shops, galleries, possibly indoor band concerts during the wintertime," said Jansen.

"So many nonprofits, possibly for-profits, artist space, open spaces, meeting spaces," Nealon said -- including town office space among the many uses. "Certainly we see it as a huge space, and that would be a great service to the community to have everybody under one umbrella."