A.C. breaks ground on new Head Start center

DIANE D’AMICO, Education Writer | Posted: Tuesday, May 19, 2015 7:17 pm

ATLANTIC CITY — Annese Parks has been a city police officer for 14 years. On Tuesday, as she watched the groundbreaking for a new Head Start center on Bacharach Boulevard, she happily recalled her own time as a small child in the city’s program.

“I was a Head Start kid,” she called to Albert Kelly, president and CEO of the Bridgeton-based Gateway Community Action Partnership, which will operate the new center. “I still have my diploma.”

She laughed as she recited the poem on the diploma about knowing her numbers and shapes.

“We need this in this area,” she said. “My first teachers, Miss Cathy, Miss Shirley, were like parents to me. They were my first teachers. I knew how to read by the time I was 4. There are a lot of young parents here, and they need the help, too.”

The new $21 million center is being paid for by Hurricane Sandy relief funds. Four Head Start centers in the city were severely damaged in the storm, and the almost 200 students in the program are now housed at the Mayor James Usry Head Start center, the Chelsea Heights School and the Ventnor Educational Community Complex. All will move to the new site when it opens in early 2017.

The three-story 43,747-square-foot site will have 20 classrooms and room for about 300 students in both the Head Start program for children ages 3 to 5 and the Early Head Start program for infants and toddlers. The site will have a community room and be built to withstand future storms.

The site also is expected to employ about 60 people — great news to Lisa Stein, associate professor of early childhood education at Atlantic Cape Community College, which offers an associate degree in early childhood education. She said in addition to jobs, the site will offer training and clinical opportunities for staff and students in social work and nursing.

The federal Head Start program is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, and several U.S. Health and Human Services Department officials attended the groundbreaking.
“This shows the community how much we value you,” said regional director Jackie Cornell Bechelli. “This is what we think of your potential.”

Regional administrator Joyce Thomas called the new site a mecca and sanctuary for families.

Edward Bethea, chief operating officer at Gateway, said the former county unemployment office site they bought from the county for $635,000 is perfectly located near AtlantiCare Regional Medical Center, Atlantic Cape Community College, City Hall and the library.

“We looked at many, many locations,” he said. “But we couldn’t ask for a better location than this.”

The mayor and other city officials were delighted to celebrate new development in a city working to rebound from casino closings.

Mayor Don Guardian said the site shows the city is helping to prepare children for the future.

“I want to make sure we get every child into a program before kindergarten,” he said.

Census numbers show the city has about 3,000 children under the age of 5.

The Atlantic City school district has about 340 children in state-funded preschool and is part of a federal preschool expansion grant program that will fund several more classrooms for 4-year-olds next year.

Parent Shannon Bailey, whose son Sudan, 5, attends the Usry Head Start program, said the program works and her son’s experience there has been phenomenal. The former Atlantic Club employee is president of the local Head Start Parent Committee and serves on the Policy Council.

She said her son is learning that true superheroes don’t have to wear capes but can be anyone who helps a child learn and grow.

“We’re not leaving,” she said. “So you remember me and him. We’re going to be here, and we’re going to be great.”

Kelly, who is also mayor of Bridgeton, talked about a recent Stockton University study showing that the southern part of the state is in far worse shape in almost every quality-of-life measure.

“We cannot allow our situation to dictate our life and just throw our hands in the air,” he said. “We must continue to overcome and seek greatness in our community. One way is what you see here. I am an eternal optimist. We have to overcome for our kids.”

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