

# Rush County transforming former Walmart into all-in-one community center

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By **Alex Brown**



RUSHVILLE, Ind. - Officials in Rush County have broken ground on what is being called a transformational redevelopment of a former Walmart site. The county is transforming the 50,000-square-foot building into the Rush County REC Center, which will bring together a variety of social services and recreation amenities under one roof.

The \$20 million project will also include a 27,000-square-foot addition that will house a gymnasium and indoor pool.

John McCane, executive director for Rush County Economic Development, told Inside INdiana Business the project has been years in the making.

“We tried to find a situation where we are creating something that provides social services but at the same time, fitness for the community,” McCane said. “Quite candidly, the project was set up to be in two phases, the first being the social services side, and then the second phase would be more of the recreation side. As we kept moving forward, we believed that it made sense to do both at once.”

The Walmart store closed in 2018, and the city later acquired the property, which has since sat empty.

McCane said the catalyst for the project stems from a \$5 million grant from Indianapolis-based Lilly Endowment Inc.’s Giving Indiana Funds for Tomorrow initiative.

The REC Center—which stands for Recreation, Education and Collaboration—will house the Rushville Public Library, the Rush County Senior Center, and the Rush County Community Assistance Food Pantry, among other regional social services.

The facility will also include a new childcare center, which McCain said is “extraordinarily needed” in the community. He adds having various services under one roof will provide opportunities for collaboration with the childcare center.

“You have the library close to the childcare. So obviously, there’s opportunities of working together,” he said. “You see situations with the senior center being within the facility, so you maybe have some seniors that can read books and interact with young people. That, we believe, is good for the young people and at the same time, good for the seniors as well.”

The center will provide an expanded space for the food pantry, including a teaching kitchen. The library will also have double the space of its current location that will include informal meeting and gathering spaces for community use.

The new construction at the site will serve as the primary spot for recreation, including a fitness center, basketball court, walking & running track, an indoor pool and daycare center.

McCane, a former mayor of Rushville, said this will be the first time the city has had an indoor pool.

“Rush County High School had a swim team for many years, and we had to bus our children to different communities for the sake of just practicing,” he said. “So this will allow those the opportunity to have a swim team again.”

He again noted the collaboration with the childcare center and senior center and how having them in close proximity could help provide swim lessons for children and aquatic exercise opportunities for seniors.

Construction of the REC Center is expected to take 16-18 months to complete.

In addition to the Lilly Endowment funding, the project has received a grant from the state's Regional Economic Acceleration and Development Initiative, or READI, as well as redevelopment tax credits from the state.

Funding has also come from sources such as the Rushville Public Library, Rush Memorial Hospital, city of Rushville, Rush County, Diamond Pet Foods, Gleaners Food Bank, the Herdrich Family, and the Buchanan Family Foundation.

McCane noted it was important to ensure as few tax dollars as possible were used for the REC Center's construction. He said the \$20 million for construction is in the bank, with only 10% of taxpayer debt service related to the library's costs.

Now, the county is looking to raise funds to maintain operations at the center once it's open. The Rush County Community Foundation has established the Ebert H. and Bessie M. Schroeder Fund, which will support the sustainability of the REC Center, and officials will seek the help of the community.

"When I go out, or the foundation goes out and ask people in the community to donate to the community center, well, they're not really donating for the sake of the building itself," McCane said. "They're gonna be donating to make sure that that building will be there for many, many years to come."

Additionally, McCane believes the center will be a boon for talent attraction in the county.

"I think as young people look at places where they're going to move and raise their families, having the opportunity to be in a community that's got these facilities is going to be a blessing to them."