

Deseret Morning News, Thursday, December 14, 2006

Breaking ground for unity

By Doug Smeath

Deseret Morning News

It's been four years in the making, but the Sorenson Unity Center is finally materializing.

Salt Lake City Mayor Rocky Anderson first presented the idea to billionaire Jon Huntsman on Dec. 13, 2002. Anderson proposed a deal to swap land owned by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at the corner of California Avenue and 900 West for the right of the church to restrict certain speech and behavior on the Main Street Plaza downtown.

Exactly four years later, Anderson, Huntsman and a host of other key players, including the center's namesake, James LeVoy Sorenson, broke ground Wednesday on the 26,000-square-foot community center.

The center, which is next door to the Sorenson Multi-Cultural Center, will include a number of classrooms for computer and language training that will be taught by Salt Lake Community College and the city. The center also features a Salt Lake Donated Dental Services clinic; a 2,500-square-foot performance space; and a 6,200-square-foot health and fitness center.



Dignitaries break ground Wednesday on the Sorenson Unity Center in Salt Lake City. The 26,000-square-foot community center will include classrooms for computer and language training, a Salt Lake Donated Dental Services clinic, a performance space and a health and fitness center.

Tom Smart, Deseret Morning News

"This is a moment we've been waiting for, for a very long time," Anderson said Wednesday.

The mayor traded the city's easement on the block of Main Street between South Temple and North Temple shortly after Huntsman's Alliance for Unity agreed to the concept, and the City Council approved the deal in June 2003.

It wasn't long before problems cropped up.

A number of funding gaps developed as plans progressed, and those shortfalls brought wrangling over whether corners should be cut, such as doing away with some of the classrooms or a drop-in child-care center.

But the center's promoters pushed for it to be built as it had first been envisioned. In the end, Sorenson and the Alliance for Unity donated a combined \$6.5 million.

Still, as recently as last month, the project was \$700,000 short. This past summer, the city's

public-services director, Rick Graham, told Anderson and the Deseret Morning News that he worried negative press surrounding the center would discourage private donations.

But on Nov. 14, the City Council approved accepting a \$1.99 million donation from U.S. Bank using New Market Tax Credits, a federal program that gives tax credits for private donations to projects in low-income urban or rural areas.

Money wasn't the only stumbling block for the center. A home was located between the land donated for the center by the church and the land donated by Sorenson. In the legal work involved in securing that property, the center's planners found themselves in the middle of the homeowner's 18-year divorce case.

Huntsman said the center shows that "a divided city could be brought together" and called the center "a great salvation instead of a division." Anderson said the center brings closure to the Main Street Plaza debate, "one of the most divisive, contentious disputes in Salt Lake City history."

The center is being built in Salt Lake City's Glendale neighborhood, one of the state's more diverse areas. Councilman Van Turner, who represents the area, called it "Utah's melting pot."

Councilman Dave Buhler said that the center is a celebration of more than the city's diversity and differences — it is a symbol of residents' ability to work together.

"There's so many things that people look at that divide us," Buhler said. "There's so much more that unites us."

The center is expected to be completed in late October 2007. In compliance with a recently approved city ordinance, it will be built to Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design standards.

E-mail: dsmeath@desnews.com

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