

Wisconsin-Based Ministry to Launch The Nation's First Youth Mall

Organizers say the Appleton, Wis., shopping and activity center will help churches reach out to teens in their community

In 1954 Appleton, Wis., opened the nation's first fully enclosed shopping mall. Now, 50 years later, the Valley Fair Mall is getting a major makeover to become the nation's first youth mall.

But this isn't some corporate leech trying to tap into the \$90-per-week wad of cash the average teen spends. This is a faith-friendly, community-based effort that sees dollar signs as secondary.

"What good does it do to gain the world and lose your soul?" asks Dave Lehman, founder and executive director of the nonprofit YouthFutures, a faith-based community organization. "This could be very profitable, but that's not our passion. We want to take that money and invest it in kids."

The investment begins with the pending purchase of the dying Valley Fair Mall with an Aug. 21 Grand Reopening planned. "Part of the concept behind the mall is that there are 94,000 teens in this four-county region, and like a lot of other communities, there's not that much for teens to do," said CEO Greg Books, a former pastor and currently an elder at Evangel Worship Center in Menasha, Wisc.

"Teens really don't have that much to do, and it's a breeding

ground for trouble,” Books said. “What we want to create is a venue where there’s entertainment choices—a skate park, theater, paintball, stores, food court, places to sit, a comedy house—there’s just a plethora of choices, but none of those choices will get you into trouble.”

An inexpensive theater, skate park, PC gaming venue and hip-hop clothing store already are open, and other attractions should open their doors in time for the Grand Reopening. With an eye toward investing in teens, Books and Lehman describe their concept as a town square. Community involvement is essential and gives the church space beside government and commercial establishments.

“Richard John Newhouse wrote a series of books where he coined the phrase ‘naked public square,’” Books said. “And his concern was that in political debate and in public debate you can be involved no matter your motivation—unless that motivation is religious, and then you’re required to check your beliefs at the door as the price of getting into the square.”

YouthFutures wants its mall to be a place that welcomes faith. The plan calls for a major anchor to be Matt’s House, which will occupy a former Kohl’s department store, and offer a café, climbing wall, inflatable games, a recording studio and practice rooms, and more.

“Matt’s House is really a bridge for the churches into the community,” said Rob Strauss, president of Matt’s House and former pastor at Calvary Bible Church in Neenah, Wis. The name for Matt’s House comes from Matthew the disciple, who Strauss said essentially threw a party for his friends to introduce them to Jesus. Matt’s House isn’t its own church or youth

group, but instead it is a point of contact for the 34 local churches involved.

While Matt's House is a Christian-based tenant, organizers say the mall itself is more of a venue that allows faith to have a voice, distinguishing Valley Fair from other wholly Christian ventures, such as the Concord, N.C., mall owned and operated by First Assembly of God.

The whole idea is the brainchild of Lehman, who's been mulling the prospect for more than 10 years. Three years ago he resigned from Appleton Community Evangelical Free Church to pursue the project full time. "Dave showed me the concept on the back of an envelope—that's where all great ideas are birthed," Books said.

So far Lehman and Books aren't alone in thinking this is a great idea. At least 13 corporate donors have signed on with substantial gifts. Appleton Mayor Timothy M. Hanna and U.S. Congressman Mark Green are both on the YouthFutures board of advisers. The Chris Farley Foundation plans to open the Chris Farley Comedy House at the mall. Teens have signed up as well, eagerly joining a Teen Advisory Board and committing to raise \$250,000 for the mall themselves.

And the youth mall concept doesn't end in Appleton. Said Books: "There are literally hundreds of cities that have that same combination of a dead or dying mall, a teen population with nothing to do, and a strong, vibrant faith community."

Kevin D. Hendricks in Appleton, Wis.