

Neck of Woods completes second floor, adds capacity

By Lisa Loomis

Neck of the Woods Child Care Center is in the middle of a \$1.5 million expansion to convert the second floor of its Waitsfield facility into four new classrooms, allowing the nonprofit to serve up to 30 additional children.

Construction began in June and is expected to be substantially complete by late fall, though the new classrooms are not expected to open until 2027. The project will increase the center's licensed capacity from 70 to 100 children, while adding a kitchen, upgraded safety systems, an elevator, and additional staff space.



Rendering of Neck of the Woods renovations.

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Betsy Jondro, Neck of the Woods board member and head of fundraising said that completion of the project means raising another \$700,000. She reported that after a July 14 meeting with the Mad River Valley Community Fund, that organization committed \$100,000 towards the renovation, earmarked for the elevator. The total cost of the elevator is \$185,000.

"We are going to dedicate the elevator and the new entryway to Louise Jennings. It is because of her that the Mad River Valley Community Fund was founded back in the day," Jondro said.

CRITICAL NEED

She said that the \$100,000 from the community fund,

plus another \$50,000 that has been pledged from a private donor, will be used to set up a match so that the first \$150,000 raised for that final \$700,000 will be doubled.

"We are so thankful to the MRVCF and their ongoing support. With this donation, they have granted Neck of the Woods over \$350,000 in the last five years, helping us address the critical need for high-quality childcare to the families of the Mad River Valley," Jondro added.

The expansion comes as Neck of the Woods continues to maintain a waiting list of roughly 100 children, with the greatest demand for infant care.

A GROWING NEED

Founded in 2020 with 18 children, Neck of the Woods became a nonprofit the same year and purchased the former Small Dog Electronics building in early 2021. Since then, the organization has renovated the first floor into seven classrooms serving children from 6 weeks to 5 years old, updated water and wastewater infrastructure, became a Head Start provider in 2023 and absorbed the Waitsfield Children's Center in 2024.

Today, the organization employs 25 full- and part-time staff members and also operates after-school and summer camp programs at Moretown Elementary School.

Founder and executive director Moie Moulton said families continue to struggle to find dependable child care, even when they develop

temporary solutions.

"When we say there's no room, the parents panic," Moulton said. "They either stop working for a duration of time, or they get a nanny, do a nanny share or rely on a family member. Then three to six months later they contact us again because what they decided on isn't long term."

Although many families place their names on multiple waiting lists, Moulton said the demand remains significant, particularly for infants, where staffing ratios are lowest.

SECOND FLOOR

The renovation will convert the building's second floor into four classrooms, each with its own bathroom, while reconfiguring the first floor to include a dedicated kitchen and a sensory and gross motor room for indoor play and therapeutic services.

"We have a lot of kids who receive occupational and physical therapy services," Moulton said. "They'll be able to utilize that space."

The new kitchen will replace the center's current makeshift food preparation area, where staff rely on refrigerators, microwaves, toaster ovens and hot plates. Once completed, it will prepare lunches and snacks for all children enrolled at the center while meeting federal Head Start requirements.

The project also includes new sprinkler and fire alarm systems, upgraded HVAC equipment, electronic security and access controls, and an ADA-compliant entrance.

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PET OF THE WEEK



Cyndi Lauper came to CVHS when her owner was moving and unable to take her along. She is new to us, so we are still getting to know her. So far she has demonstrated that she would do best in a calm and quiet environment, with someone who is willing to be patient with her as she adjusts to her new environment. In her prior home when she was comfortable she would occasionally be a lap cat, and was used to an indoor-only home. So far she is tolerating her feline roommates with a similar personality. She has no prior experience with children or canines, and due to her timid personality we feel she would do best in a home without them.

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Neck of the Woods

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with an elevator.

"We're not putting Band-Aids on things," board member Karl Klein said during the tour. "We're actually fixing the bones." Klein said much of the work has focused on making the building safe for second-floor occupancy.

"There was no fire safety," he said. "There were fire

alarm systems, but nothing to put out a fire."

FUNDRAISING CONTINUES

The expansion carries a \$1.5 million price tag, about 70% higher than initial estimates developed in 2023 because of rising construction costs.

Neck of the Woods has raised more than \$2.1 million since its founding and has al-

ready invested about \$1.3 million into the property. For the current expansion, the organization has secured \$800,000 through federal, state and local grants, including funding from the Northern Border Regional Commission and state Community Recovery and Revitalization Program grants, while launching a \$700,000 capital campaign to complete the project.

Jondro said construction began this summer because some funding comes from ARPA funds and must be spent before the end of 2026.

The center expects construction to continue through the summer and fall while children remain in the building, with major first-floor work scheduled during August when fewer children are on site. Although the classrooms

are expected to be complete this fall, Klein said the organization intentionally delayed occupancy until 2027 to avoid disrupting operations during the academic year.

"We already planned not to have kids in there for the fall," Klein said. "We knew all the challenges of construction in an ongoing child-care business."