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Niles Greek church, St. Haralambos, completing \$4.2 million community center building



Parishioners and clergy at St. Haralambos Greek Orthodox Church in Niles are about to realize a long-held dream. They are overseeing the finishing touches on a spacious, multipurpose community center at 7401 N. Caldwell Ave., next to the church.

“This is something that has been dreamed about for over 20 years,” said Rev. Fr. Constantine P. Botsis, senior priest of the church. It will give the parish space for youth activities, fellowship for seniors, kitchen space for the many food fundraisers, a gym for athletics and more.



“Some of the (activities) are going to be community-based. Some are going to be based on different organizations. Some are going to be based on youth and athletics. It’s going to be very versatile,” Botsis said.

Parishioner Perry Giannopoulos, Chairman of the Phase III Committee, which has overseen the construction of the building, led this reporter on a virtual tour of the new 27,639-square-foot building. He reported that construction began in the fall of 2019. The building, which cost about \$4.2 million, was financed through a fundraising campaign among parishioners of the church, which goes by the official name of Holy Taxiarchai and St. Haralambos Greek Orthodox Church.

“An architect, Bill Kokalias, who is a member of our community, donated all of the architectural services,” Giannopoulos said. “His company, Axios Architects, put a lot of work into this.”

“During COVID, we were at the point where we thought we might have to put the project on hold,” Giannopoulos said. “We were originally planning on borrowing about a million dollars to help us finish the project. Then in March or April, we got word of a donation that was made by the estate of Charles Condes, who was a parishioner here who had passed away a few years ago. He had left over a million dollars to the church. We were able to put some of his donation toward the construction, which was why we were able to finish the building this year.”



The building includes a large main lobby, which the church plans to use for events. There's also a gym will be fully equipped, including a basketball court and a volleyball court.

The building also includes a commercial-size kitchen, which will help parish volunteers as they prepare for the church's Big Greek Food Fest, held every July.

Food pantry, food fests

“We have a lot of food fundraisers,” Giannopoulos said. “We've got our annual Food Festival and our Ladies' Society does very large bake sales with hundreds of people coming through.”

The kitchen, which has large storage areas, will also benefit the Agape Ministry, which was organized to assist families that were struggling during the pandemic.

“We have distributed approximately 32 tons of food since April,” said Tom Kanelos, co-chairman of the Agape Ministry. “With our new space, we will be able to expand the items we stock for distribution and have a dedicated space for this work.”

Kanelos noted that the additional space will help with other church food-related ministries. That includes a meals on wheels program which currently serves 38 people and a hot meal program “which we prepare monthly for 100 persons and take to another church for distribution there,” he said. “With our new facility, we hope to be able to serve those 100 meals in our own facility one day.” Kanelos added that the additional storage space means they can buy items in bulk, which will be more cost-effective.

In addition, Giannopoulos said, “For day-to-day use, we’re hoping to make this a little café so that some of our senior citizens will be able to walk inside the gym and get some exercise while it’s cold out. Then they can hang out here and have a cup of coffee.”

There are plans to put in meeting rooms and classrooms on the first floor in the future.

“We want to leave everything kind of flexible for now,” Giannopoulos explained, “because we don’t know how things are going to go with COVID—how long we’re going to need to socially distance.”

Performances, kids’ activities

The second floor includes a huge room with a stage that will hold over 300 folding chairs for post-pandemic use once large groups are allowed to gather again.

“We’ve been limited on capacity in the church,” Giannopoulos said. “We’re hoping to hold a second liturgy on Sundays here so that we can fit another 80 people in here. That would double our capacity on Sundays.”

That space will also be used for performances by the church’s Greek schools. St. Haralambos, which has between 650 and 700 member families each year, has a preschool program, an afternoon Greek School, and a Saturday Greek School.



About one-third of the basement will be used for storage. The other two-thirds will be an open space. "It will be used by some of our youth ministries," Giannopoulos said. "We'll make it kind of a fun area for kids to hang out."

Giannopoulos said that he was willing to devote the huge amount of time required on this project because, "My wife grew up in the parish and I've always felt so welcomed. I felt it was something that was important for the future of the parish." "For years this church has not had adequate space to offer the ministry that this parish could have offered," said junior priest Fr. George Lamberis. "With the addition of the new building, we'll be able to offer so many more ministries, not only for our community but for the greater community of Niles as well. We've always had dreams and visions of doing a lot more as far as outreach is concerned. Now we're going to make a lot of those things happen with God's

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Saint Joseph the Hesychast

