

Salvation Army at Memphis digs in to Kroc Center

Groundbreaking begins today for family facility

by Ryan Poe — The Commercial Appeal

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The Salvation Army at Memphis starts work on its Kroc Center today, making the project one of a handful to survive the recent financial woes hurting nonprofit groups across the country.

Memphis Mayor A C Wharton is expected to be among those attending the groundbreaking ceremony, which will begin at 10 a.m. in a tent set up near where the property borders the former Libertyland amusement park, said Major Mark Woodcock, area commander.

The Salvation Army has contracted with Montgomery Martin Contractors LLC and is now waiting for the city to issue a building permit.

Funding for the center, the largest planned in the South, comes from the national Kroc Foundation, which gave the local group \$62 million, half to build the center and half for an endowment to provide operating funds. The \$25 million raised locally will bring that endowment to a total of \$56 million.

Woodcock said the Salvation Army chose the fairgrounds location because of its rich mixture of people from different races and economic backgrounds.

"You couldn't pick a better location," he said.

The family-oriented facility will have a gymnasium, indoor and outdoor water parks, a 300-seat theater, classrooms and laboratories, among other amenities.

The 100,000-square-foot center will also bring job opportunities to people in the surrounding neighborhoods. The new building will be staffed by 40 full-time employees, and in the summer, by an additional 100 or so part-time employees.

When she died in 2003, Joan Kroc, widow of McDonald's founder Jay Kroc, left more than \$1.5 billion to the Salvation Army to build 31 such community centers.

The Salvation Army's national office has since trimmed the number of proposed centers to 25 and has required local groups to raise a part of the cost, usually about \$25 million.

Because of the recession, projects have faltered across the country.

Three of the 10 centers planned for the Salvation Army's 15-state Southern territory have already been canned because local groups couldn't raise the matching funds, spokesman Steve Carpenter said.

"In Memphis, it's just amazing the number of generous people who, despite the economy, continue giving money," he said.

The Salvation Army's local branch quietly began raising money four years ago, tapping corporations and big donors for \$18 million. In 2008, the organization began asking for help from smaller donors, who contributed the additional \$7 million.

"A lot of people came together to make this happen, from a lot of walks in life," Woodcock said. "It was quite a blessing for us."

Woodcock said that the Memphis Kroc Center was originally set to get \$50 million from the Kroc Foundation. It has received an additional \$12 million for construction and endowments after other projects in Missouri, North Carolina and South Carolina failed, loosening funds.

Woodcock added that the local effort to raise money for the center has taken something of a toll on the group's overall budget.

"We have put so much focus on the Kroc Center, and it has distracted us," he said. "Fundraising has suffered because of this."

The Salvation Army in Memphis has a \$300,000 shortfall to make up this year, partly because of the Kroc Center and partly because of the economy, Woodcock said.

Even so, the Kroc Center will be worth it in the long run, he said.

"Once we get beyond this, the impact we'll be having will be greater because of this," Woodcock said. "We're still serving the people we need to be serving."

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