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Talks underway for new Community Family Center on Karger site

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The City of Highland Park has entered into exploratory talks with other agencies about the possibility of creating a Community Family Center in downtown Highland Park, the parties disclosed Tuesday.

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The family center would be centrally located on land that includes the site of the city-owned Karger Center at 1850 Green Bay Road. Built in 1966, the Karger Center served as the park district's Recreation Center before the new facility was constructed adjacent to the clubhouse at the Highland Park Country Club.

Participants involved in the talks include the Park District of Highland Park, Moraine Township, the Northern Suburban Special Recreation Association and the Community Family Center. The latter is an umbrella not-for-profit corporation that encompasses five separate family and children's services agencies that collectively serve about 3,500 participants at scattered sites around Highland Park and Highwood.

Early discussions envision that each participating government or social service agency would operate programs and services out of the new center with an emphasis on combining programs and sharing space to create economies of scale. The agencies have discussed a community model that would provide a variety of services for individuals, children and families under one roof.

"Human service needs in our community are increasing, as identified by the Human Services Task Force," said Highland Park Mayor Nancy Rotering, in a statement announcing the collaboration. "Meeting the needs responsibly and cost-effectively is a core priority of the city."

No public funds have been spent so far on the initiative.

The City of Highland Park currently leases space at the Karger Center to three organizations: Highland Park Nursery and Day Care, the Music Theater Company and Illinois Rhythmic Gymnastics. The nursery school is one of the five agencies under the Community Family Center umbrella.

Five years ago, the city's initial agreement with the Community Family Center called for the agency to submit plans for financing renovations to the Karger Center. The city recently extended the deadline for financing plans until June of 2016. However, the new collaboration envisions razing the Karger Center and constructing a new facility on an expanded site.

"The Community Family Center has long been an advocate for constructing a Highland Park community center to house its agencies in a state-of-the-art modern facility," said Herbert Wander, president of the Community Family Center. "This project represents a prudent investment to enhance our community's future." Agencies under the Community Family Center include: The Highland Park Community Nursery and Day Care Center; Tri-Con Child Care Center; Highland Park/Highwood Home Child Care Association; Family Network, and Family Service: Prevention, Education and Counseling.

Craig Culp, executive director of the Northern Suburban Special Recreation Association, said his organization is participating in the meetings to explore the potential for addressing its own facility needs within Highland Park. The association's board of directors approved a capital and facility acquisition plan as part of its 2013 strategic plan, Culp said.

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