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The City of Plains is one step closer to getting a grocery store that will be placed in the downtown area. L&T file photo/Robert Pierce

By ROBERT PIERCE

• Leader & Times

The football field at Southwestern Heights High School is familiar to its fair share of activities during the school year, but the facility normally is vacant during the summer season.

This Saturday afternoon, walkers will take to the track at the field to help raise money for a project in one of the two towns the school represents.

The Community Enhancement Foundation of Plains is hosting a community walk-a-thon to help fund its first project – getting a grocery store in the small Meade County Community.

CEF President Jeanne Roberts said the event will take place from 3 to 7 p.m. at the SWH track, and people can walk together as a team of six or individually.

Registration for the walk-a-thon is \$10 per person, and that cost covers a T-shirt and one ticket for a drink and hot dog. All of the money goes toward funding the store, which the foundation has named Grand Avenue Market.

There will be other food on hand as well, including a build a burrito dinner from 5 to 7. CEF member Jennifer Miller said everyone, not just walk participants, can come out to enjoy the food and festivities.

“You can join it just as a community member,” she said. “Come out and enjoy the dinner.”

Plains’ Hispanic Ladies group has donated its time to provide the dinner. Cost of the meal is \$7 on Saturday or \$6 for those who pre-register.

The event will begin wrapping up around 6:45 with a color finale.

“They take an organic powder and throw it up in the air, and people run through it,” Miller said. “It’s multiple colors.”

Roberts said the finale will take place on the center of the Heights football field.

“It’s just going to be the people that want to be covered with the color,” she said. “They will have their choice of whether they want to go through the finale line.”

At 3:30, 4:30 and 5:30, games will take place, such as a three-legged race and bowling game.

“We’re going to have a wading pool out there for anybody to step into to cool down,” Roberts said.

Tents will be set up on the football field, and Miller said no alcohol will be served.

“We’ll have music going,” she said. “People can bring pop up tents if they want. We recommend they bring chairs. They can bring their own drinks, but we’ll have water, Gatorade and Powerade there.”

There will be a team competition Saturday for friends, families and co-workers to work together to raise money while having fun. Prizes will be awarded to the team that collects the most money, whether it be a flat pledge or by a per lap donation. Pledge sheets are available at local businesses or by e-mail at walkcefop@gmail.com.

Sponsors for the walk-a-thon include National Beef, Plains State Bank, Lana Miller CPA, Plains Equity Exchange, A Cut On The Corner, Chase Trucking, Lauren Chase Photography, Mid-Plains Construction, Pedro’s Chips, Main Street Liquor and Home Lumber Supply.

Grand Avenue Market is part of the Access to Food and Nutrition Education Project sponsored by the CEF. Seed money has already been collected on the project, including \$25,000 from State Farm through the insurance company’s Cause An Effect initiative, and Roberts said the CEF is trying to get more funding through tax credits.

“We’ve applied for the tax credit,” she said. “The application deadline for that was May 3. We had all of the pledges spoken for by the time the application went in. That’s a real big plus.”

Roberts said Saturday's walk-a-thon is a fundraiser, but it is primarily designed to get the Plains community involved in the grocery store project.

She said the CEF has discussed having other money making events like a wine and cheese party and a chocolate party. The foundation will likely also apply for a Community Development Block Grant.

"I think the deadline to apply for it is Oct. 31," Roberts said. "With that one, you have to have matching funds. The matching funds can come from the tax credits if we get awarded them. That one is a federal grant, and it's a lot of red tape to go through. It's going to be more detailed and in depth than the tax credit one and a lot more competition."

Roberts said the tax credit competition is nonetheless fierce, and three other Southwest Kansas communities are also in the running – Meade, Minneola and Cimarron.

"As far as I know, we are the ones that have all the pledges spoken for," she said.

CEF members would not give a figure as to how much needs to be raised to start a grocery store, but Roberts did say "each little bit helps."

"The community has been really amazing, especially with the tax credits," she said. "We were really happy with the way the tax credits."

Roberts and Miller stressed that the dinner and the walk-a-thon itself is not just for Plains, but the entire surrounding area.

Roberts said with about half a decade of work on the grocery store project, it is coming along nicely.

“We’re just working on it slowly but steadily,” she said. “We’re not giving up. We’ve been working on it for five and a half years.”

If the CEF is awarded tax credits, Roberts said the foundation would likely have to start work on a grocery store in the next two years.

“The tax credits are for 2013 and 2014,” she said. “The people that have pledged can give all of it in 2013, or they can split it between 2013 and 2014. They have till Dec. 31, 2014, but we have two years from the day we get awarded it, which is supposed to be by the middle of July.”

CEF board members can be contacted for more information about the event or to turn in registration and pledge forms. Board members are Miller, Roberts, Karen Winfrey, Mark Tabb and Silvia Olvera.

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