

North Greenbush Youth Center



Mike Miner (in white) youth board member and manager of the building department, of North Greenbush, with Lou Desso and sixth grader Joey Vooris and staff member Mark Difiore having a game of soccer at the open house.

Photo/Jeff Couch

Rebecca Eppelmann

On Oct. 17, the Town of North Greenbush hosted the opening night for its new Youth Center to rave reviews. And, while the program itself is not new, the parameters of it are. For North Greenbush town Councilman Lou Desso, this change is exactly what the program needed to give youth in the area a fun, safe and healthy environment to spend a few hours Friday and Saturday evenings.

Desso, who has been the chairman of the Youth Committee since taking office saw a need that he had a special interest in fixing. "I've been interested in youth for a long time," he says, "I think I was a coach or teacher in my former life because I love working with kids." Though the Center has been operating since 1978, it needed some reworking, so the Youth and Recreation Committee and the Youth Center sub-committee have been meeting at least twice a month to do some revamping.

In time, new policies, procedures and goals were set. The main goal, Desso says, "is providing a safe, healthy environment that's fun for the children of North Greenbush." In order to meet that goal, the first change was the amount of structure added to the program itself. The biggest new rule involves the free memberships for which parents and their children sign up.

The first type of membership, typically meant for sixth-eighth graders, but available to older children as well, is one in which youth will be dropped off at the Center, will sign in, and aren't allowed to leave until their parents pick them up. The second allows visitors to leave once during the night and

return, but the second time they leave they aren't allowed back in. The memberships are agreed upon by children and parents. If, for any reason, children leave with someone not designated by parents, the parents will be immediately informed.

For Desso and parents alike, this deals with one of the biggest problems of the Center's past. According to Desso, "We used to see people coming in and out all night and we're not allowing that any longer." With the new memberships in place, coming and going and hanging around outside the center is no longer allowed. The Center and the surrounding area will be monitored closely by staff who have also been trained and oriented to the new goals through staff orientation meetings and ongoing supervision. Paid staff consists of teens 18 and older and several school teachers, many of whom are in their mid-twenties. Desso is also in the process of signing up parents to volunteer for evenings; the list is already growing from their opening night.

Between 50 and 60 kids showed up for the Friday opening, and about 45 returned the following evening. The Center, located at the Town Hall at 2 Douglas St. in Wynantskill, is open Fridays and Saturdays from October through May, with hours from 7-11 p.m., and is open every evening during school breaks. Desso's hope for the future of the Center is that the younger kids who go there now will continue to in future years.

Each Friday and Saturday evening there is a new event, through which Desso and the committee members have worked to incorporate "increasingly age appropriate activities." November events include a boys/girls

football tournament, a music night complete with air band contest and movie night, and many other activities. Besides the gym, which Desso says will be the main attraction, the Center also offers a game room, a TV room for which permitted channels are written in the rules, and video games which must be rated E for everyone and approved by staff. The schedule for upcoming events is planned two months in advance and is available on the Town of North Greenbush's website, www.townofng.com. Special events will be advertised at the Town Hall on the community message board.

If the opening is any way of gauging the future of the center, things are looking good. Parents at the event, according to Desso, were thrilled with the new structure and having a safe, fun place for their children to spend time. For Desso, thrilled isn't a strong enough word. "I was amazed," he said, "there were so many children the first night, I just couldn't believe it and parents just kept coming and signing up and volunteering."

Quick to share credit, the councilman offers thanks to his committee and Mike Miner, who is the manager of the building department for the town. Of Miner, Desso says "there is no way we could have done this without his energy and effort." For Desso though, it is about more than just simply building up the program. "we're really trying to impact our youth in a positive way. I feel strongly that we're going to do this and it's a privilege and a very rewarding thing to be a part of."

For more information about the Youth Center contact Desso by email at desso@townofng.com or by calling Miner at 283-2714. ¹⁷