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HOME - CREDIT MEYER FOR MIRACLE ON 21ST STREET

BY RHONDA HOLMAN

It seems like a miracle in this local economy, maybe in any economy. But not even a year and a half after Russ Meyer went public with his dream of an East 21st Street complex to boost kids, the \$8 million is committed for its new Boys & Girls Club and the ground is broken. Besides the Boys & Girls Club, to open in June 2007, the complex will include a preschool called the Opportunity Project, to open this fall, funded by generous Wichita philanthropists Barry and Paula Downing.

And on Thursday, the public-private partnership added another exciting component, a new K-8 school for Wichita's USD 259, perhaps devoted to the International Baccalaureate curriculum, the fine arts or another magnet concept.

Designed around input from the neighborhood's residents, the programs in this empowering complex will range from day care to job counseling to parenting help to sports to fine arts to computers.

To be sure, the project's astonishing pace is a testament to the powers of persuasion of Meyer, chairman emeritus of Cessna Aircraft Co. and an optimistic force in this community for decades. Meyer's esteem and influence are so great that when he talks, action follows.

Once Meyer brought to the table community leaders and the facility's neighbors, his vision proved contagious, said Marni Vliet, president and chief executive of the Kansas Health Foundation. "Everybody rallied," she said Thursday. "The energy begat energy."

Meyer's is the kind of singular leadership that permanently transforms a community and, we can only hope, inspires others to give of their own time and imagination.

That said, Meyer didn't do it alone. Koch Industries, Pizza Hut franchisees, the airplane manufacturers, the Kansas Health Foundation and many other entities deserve praise for putting up the dollars necessary to ensure that Meyer's miracle on 21st Street not only gets built but also delivers on its promises once it opens.

Then, it will take creativity and commitment on the part of the programs within it to secure sustainable funding of \$1 million or more a year, likely from a variety of private and public sources. That will put the community to the test long term. But if the complex's power to guide and lift up young lives is as advertised, the investment will pay off long term, too.