

New Cassel opens dream community center

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The dream of a community center in New Cassel is decades old.

So its opening Saturday in a festive ceremony that drew longtime residents, community leaders, government officials, the youth of New Cassel -- plus Marcus Camby of the Knicks -- was a measure of triumph.

"This is something folks have been asking for and talking about for several generations," North Hempstead Town Supervisor Jon Kaiman said Friday.

Hundreds of residents visited the state-of-the-art, \$26 million facility, which will have a dual purpose. The center, at 141 Garden St., will accommodate recreation -- two NBA-size basketball courts, a fitness center, game room, dance and television studios -- and official government business. An emergency response unit and the 311 call center will be stationed there.

"This is unbelievable, I'm flabbergasted," said Keith Little, 55, who grew up in New Cassel and now lives in Uniondale.

Plans to build a youth center emerged after a five-day summit in 2002, when town leaders and several hundred residents hashed out ideas to revitalize downtown New Cassel. Since then, development plans in the community have been plagued by corruption trials and delays in construction. In July, a former town official was found guilty of receiving bribes and official misconduct, and the former head of North Hempstead Town's Community Development Agency was found guilty of official misconduct.

"We had a lot of bumps in the road, difficult challenges from elected officials who did things that they shouldn't have," Kaiman said. "We just kept our eye on the prize and moved forward."

In the 10 years since, residents kept patient. "I've waited so long to see this day," said Jackie Caines, 65, of New Cassel.



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Keith Little's mother, Mildred, who is 84 and has lived in the neighborhood since the 1950s, and her friend Marjorie Simon, 72, a resident for four decades, both recall parenting at a time when youth centers were hard to come by.

Indeed in 1983, at least three Nassau County youth centers were closed, including the Kuzuri in New Cassel. "When that center closed, there were very little facilities for our kids," Simon said.

Finally, Kaiman said, New Cassel has its centerpiece new facility, one that could draw residents from elsewhere in the town.

"There was always a sense that this part of the community never received much attention," he said. "This is just something that was essential to their well-being."

Kenneth Little, Mildred's older son, is 57 and has a daughter who now works at the center. "Revitalization has gone a little bit slowly," he said. "Once people see what's in this community center, they're going to see revitalization is no joke. It's something that should happen, and will happen."

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