

‘Hoops and Homework’ makes debut in Framingham



Town Meeting member Herb Chasan, left, and Board of Selectman Chairman Dennis Giombetti, right, hold the tape for Jim Cuddy, center, of SMOC during the ribbon cutting of the "Hoops and Homework" after-school project during the grand opening on Wednesday.

By Scott O'Connell
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What started out as a series of excited phone calls nearly a year ago was finally revealed in reality Wednesday, as local and state officials celebrated the opening of Framingham's new "Hoops and Homework" program.

The brainchild of resident Herb Chasan, who sold the idea to town leaders last summer, the initiative is aimed at providing free, five-day-a-week after-school programming to kids in some of Framingham's most economically depressed areas. It will operate at three sites – Pelham Apartments, Cochituate Cooperative Homes, and the Framingham Housing Authority apartments on Pusan Road – where staff and volunteers will help students with their homework, provide extra tutoring, coordinate recreational activities, and offer other enrichment opportunities.

The program is being funded with \$81,000 approved by Town Meeting last fall. Technically a town initiative, it is run by the South Middlesex Opportunity Council, which submitted the only bid to operate the program this past winter.

"This is a really proud moment for SMOC," said the social service agency's executive director, Jim Cuddy, at a ribbon-cutting event Wednesday outside the program's new home at a community center on Pusan Road. "We really believe this can make a difference."

"Here we have an opportunity to be proactive, and get to these kids while they're young," added Board of Selectmen Chairman Dennis Giombetti, echoing other officials' hopes that "Hoops and Homework" can help participating students do better in school.

SMOC program director Gwenn Weiser said organizers will be evaluating their efforts toward that end, with an eye on expanding the program if it proves successful in its first year. They will be closely monitoring students' attendance and performance, for example, and are developing a partnership with the town's school department to track how well participants are doing academically outside the program.

This year, "Hoops and Homework" is only open to youth in kindergarten through fifth grade who live in Framingham's Precinct 17 area on the south side of town. Around 15 kids have already signed up, and Weiser said there is capacity for about 10 more. The program officially began admitting students yesterday, and is scheduled to run through Oct. 31.

On Wednesday, many officials in attendance credited Chasan for getting the idea off the ground. After receiving a call from him last year, for example, Giombetti recalled discussing the proposal with Chasan over coffee and coming away impressed.

"I said to him at that time, he really identified a problem," he said. "Here we are today, as a result of the solution."

"It seemed far-fetched," said Maria Rosado, resident services manager at Pelham Apartments. "But if there was anybody who could make this happen, it was him."

Now that it has come to fruition, Rosado told the small gathering on Wednesday the program is ready to take root. "This is a seed we're planting here," she said. "This is not just a program that will end in October."