

ASHEVILLE CITIZEN-TIMES

RAINBOW RISING!

School aims to double campus size by buying adjacent church property



By Citizen-Times staff writer,
Barb Blake

Students at Rainbow Community School on Haywood Road play outdoors on the school playground, with a view of the West Asheville Church of God property in the background. The school is raising money to buy the church property, which would more than double the size of its campus. / Bill Sanders / wsanders@citizen-times.com

ASHEVILLE — The typical players in the resurgence of West Asheville’s Haywood Road corridor have been eclectic eateries, hip boutiques and various entertainment venues, along with young [families](#) drawn to its friendly residential streets and avenues.

Now, a longtime private school in the middle of the main drag is stepping into the spotlight to offer its own boost to the neighborhood.

Rainbow Community School, founded in 1977 at 574 Haywood Road, is in the midst of its “Rainbow Rising” capital campaign to raise \$200,000 toward a down payment on the adjacent West Asheville Church of God property at 60 State St., which would more than double the school’s 2.4-acre campus.

But the benefits would extend beyond the 160 students Rainbow serves, opening doors of opportunity for the larger community with the addition of an athletic field, a 300-seat performance hall and other spaces available for public use.

“It’s uncanny how perfect the property is for our school, and it is seamlessly adjacent to our current campus on the back side along State Street,” said Rainbow’s executive director, Renee Owen.

“The church is experiencing growth in its congregation

and has plans to move to a new larger location, so the timing was impeccable,” she said. “Rainbow was getting ready to build onto our current buildings when this opportunity arose.”

To seize that opportunity, Rainbow has until Dec. 20 to raise money for the down payment to secure a loan, to be followed by a three-year campaign to raise an additional \$400,000 toward purchase and renovation of the property and development of a new minipark along Haywood Road.

The next fundraiser is 3-6:30 p.m. Dec. 7 in the performance hall on the church property, with entertainment from local performers, including the Virginia Dare Devils and members of Zansa.

Owen said Rainbow has expanded its vision over the last two years to become more involved with its neighbors — even changing its name from Rainbow Mountain [Children’s](#) School to include the word “community.”

“We are an urban school and feel called

Get Involved

“Rainbow Rising,” a capital campaign to help Rainbow Community School on Haywood Road raise \$200,000 to purchase the adjacent West Asheville Church of God property and more than double the size of its campus.

Upcoming Fundraiser
3-6:30 p.m. Saturday in the performance hall at the Church of God, 60 State St., with food and entertainment.

Learn more/donate
www.rainbowcommunityschool.org;
258-9264, ext. 111
renee.owen@rainbowlearning.org.

to connect with our West Asheville neighborhood in a variety of ways, and one of the ways we have practiced that is by adopting Children First/Communities in Schools,” she said.

“For the last two years, we donated a significant portion of our event fundraising to Children First, and each class provides service, such as a mitten and coat drive or donating Thanksgiving meals,” Owen said. “And our older students tutor at Deaverview’s after-school program, which is run by CIS.”

Community impact

With the project, Rainbow hopes to expand its reach even further, from impact on the environment to becoming a community resource. Among its plans:

- Developing a site plan to reduce heat gain and water runoff from the church parking lot to the French Broad River at Carrier Park; the asphalt lot will be reduced and buffered with permeable runoff controls; scientific permaculture [gardens](#) will be installed; and old-growth trees on the campus will be preserved.

“Essentially, five green acres in the heart of West Asheville will be preserved from development and dedicated to education and community betterment,” Owen said.

- About half of Rainbow’s Haywood Road frontage will be converted from a parking lot to a park for residents and visitors to use as a resting spot and place to interact with students through student-installed interactive informational displays.

Plans include a tailgate market-like structure where students can try socially beneficial entrepreneurial plans, which is part of the sixth-grade curriculum at Rainbow.

- The 300-seat performance hall will be available to community groups and artists seeking an affordable events venue.

- Rainbow, which was honored with the Griffin Award in 1986 for preserving the historic Orr House, will preserve the main church building, which would have been at

risk for destruction in favor of new development, Owen said.

- The expansion will dramatically increase the school’s role as a neighborhood resource, with space for new classes and events to join existing meditation classes, a mother-daughter group, parenting classes and the weekly services of the Church of the Garden.

- Rainbow’s strategic plan includes replicating its educational model at other schools. The new property has a parsonage that has the potential to house [educators](#) from around the world being trained in the Rainbow model.

Community support

The expansion project is gaining widespread support from neighbors in West Asheville and beyond.

“Rainbow seems to be doing a really, really nice job of — I hate to use the word ‘alternative’ — and at the same time rigorous education, and I like that combination a lot,” said Rob Pulleyn, who is chairman of the Penland School of Crafts and is donating to Rainbow’s capital campaign through his Walnut Fund with the Community Foundation of Western North Carolina.

“I like that you can have a relatively loose school that is actually quite tight, that has high standards and high expectations,” Pulleyn said.

“Rainbow sort of sat there being a little alternative school for a generation, and then all of a sudden it’s really blooming, and I think the regeneration of West Asheville has been a catalyst for that as well.”

Nancy Hodges, watershed resources manager with RiverLink, said she appreciates Rainbow’s environmental stewardship, which will avert many pollutants from flowing into the French Broad.

“They’re going to remove some of the parking lot and do some water quality landscape features that will provide

an [educational](#) resource for the students as well as providing treatment of the water coming off their rooftops and roadway,” Hodges said. “And that will help improve the quality of water flowing into the river.”

Brady Sleeper, owner of the Universal Joint restaurant and bar a few blocks west on Haywood Road, has shown support for the expansion by donating 100 percent of a week’s sales of Sweetwater and Sierra Nevada brews to the capital campaign.

“So many Rainbow families are West Asheville families, and Rainbow opens up their property to the community year-round, whether it’s classrooms for meeting space or the Halloween hoedown or the playground,” Sleeper said.

“The expansion is not just about helping the school out, which it will,” he said, “but it’s also going to be great for the community to have that big asset right there on Haywood Road.”

Owen said she is elated at the possibilities that can come with the expansion and said she hopes the community will help with donations.

“The opportunity to purchase the church is exciting for both the school and for West Asheville, and we are grateful to live in such a vibrant neighborhood where businesses already have offered support as sponsors, with in-kind gifts and more,” she said.

“We feel confident we can raise the down payment by the deadline, with the support of families, foundations, businesses and the West Asheville community.”