

GiveWell donates \$13 mil.: Cash Feed building on Lake Mirror to be refurbished for Catapult expansion

GiveWell is donating money for downtown refurbishing of the old Cash Feed building.

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LAKELAND — City leaders have unveiled plans for a \$13 million expansion of Lakeland's Catapult entrepreneur center, calling it an unprecedented collaboration between government, business and philanthropy.

The project, to be completed in phases over several years beginning early in 2016, includes refurbishing the Lakeland Cash Feed store on the north shore of downtown's Lake Mirror.

Other phases may include a multi-level parking garage and retail venue on an adjacent site now occupied by Central Vacuum Cleaner Co., which will relocate.



MICHAEL WILSON / THE LEDGER

Lakeland Cash Feed located at 502 East Main Street in Lakeland. The site will be the future new location of Catapult Lakeland.

Spearheaded by GiveWell Community Foundation and its donors, the enhanced Catapult 2.0 bodes as a sea change for an already-thriving enterprise that has cultivated some of the city's more creative ventures — everything from bakeries to furniture designers and software developers.

“This project is about retaining and attracting the creative class,” said Brian Philpot, chairman of the Lakeland Economic Development Council's board of directors. “If that's not economic development, I don't know what is.”

Philpot and LEDC President Steve Scruggs described plans for Catapult 2.0 during a presentation Monday at The Ledger. They were joined by representatives of GiveWell, whose donors wish to remain anonymous.

GiveWell, which has about \$135 million in assets, will maintain ownership of the new, improved Catapult, an initiative of the LEDC, a privately funded business group that has funded the nonprofit center since its inception in January 2014.

Currently, Catapult is housed in the basement of the Bank of America building on South Florida Avenue. The site will be vacated once the new facility opens sometime in 2017. GiveWell will lease the property to Catapult, a nonprofit corporation, for \$10 a year.

“We're proud to be a part of this,” said Terry Simmers, president and CEO of GiveWell. “This is something they (our donors) are giving to the city of Lakeland for our community. We're excited.”

Citing a spirit of collaboration, Ledger Publisher Kevin Drake donated \$25,000 in in-kind advertising and marketing to help inaugurate the Catapult enterprise.

“This is going to be a huge legacy piece for the next 50 years,” he said. “To me, the collaboration is wonderful. This is a groundbreaking day for Lakeland.”

The project's collaborative nature includes the city's donation of several parcels of property that, combined with the current structures, will radically transform a portion of downtown that is undergoing something of a renaissance. Though marked by a train station, the area is one of the city's most picturesque and includes the recently opened Lakeland Brewing Co. and Old School Annex.

“We see it (Catapult 2.0) as a catalyst for all sorts of synergies, in ways we can't imagine,” said Lakeland Mayor Howard Wiggs, who attended Monday's gathering. “As (Florida) Polytechnic is to the region, that's what this is to the community.”

Catapult 2.0 builds on the success of the original, which serves as a business incubator, offering so-called “lifestyle” entrepreneurs an affordable environment to grow concepts, with space for meetings and other needs. The facility offers guidance for everything from pitching concepts to investors to marketing know-how.

Currently, the facility includes offices and co-working space. The average age of its 104 members is 37. Businesses centered on food form a big part of its growth, and the new facility will include a larger, full-scale commercial kitchen, along with retail space so members can test products and invite customer feedback. A working café also is in the works, to be operated by one or more Catapult members.

Catapult 2.0 also will provide expanded studio space for photographers and videographers. There will be classes on cutting-edge technologies in the fields of fabrication, machining, textiles, welding and 3D printing.

“There's a huge need for this in Lakeland,” Scruggs said, adding that many area businesses, schools and universities have pledged ongoing support for the facility that already draws members from far beyond Polk County.

Catapult 2.0 will include enhancements such as a loading dock to handle start-ups in furniture making, large-scale art installations and other handicrafts. Plans call for special courses for high school and college students, along with workshops on formulating business plans and other business-related topics.

Besides conveying land to the new project, city leaders pledge assistance in reducing red tape and expediting construction.

“This really taps into that creative economy that everyone talks about,” said Tony Delgado, Lakeland's interim city manager. “We really believe this is going to take off.”

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