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Project of the Month: Broome County to move Office of Employment and Training to allow for growth

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Concept photo of Office of Employment and Training in Oakdale Mall - Johnson County, NY

Johnson City, NY In the Spring of this year, Broome County unveiled plans to move its Office of Employment and Training and a portion of the Department of Social Services (DSS) to the former Sears location in the Oakdale Mall. The building that currently houses the Office of Employment and Training (OET) is no longer a good fit for the department and the move will give the OET room to grow.

“This is a win-win for Broome County,” said Broome County executive Jason Garnar. “Not only will we get a brand new 21st Century career development center to help train people for the thousands of open jobs we have in our community, but we will also be saving taxpayers \$80,000 a year.”

In May, Broome County entered into a lease agreement with Spark Broome LLC, owned by the Matthews family. Spark Broome has purchased and plans to refurbish the building, which is located at the north end of the Oakdale Mall. This will meet the needs of the OET and DSS, in addition to leaving room for other local entities interested. Under these plans most of the operations of the DSS would remain at the current location on Main St. in Binghamton across from Binghamton High School with all the OET moving to the new space. A resolution passed by the Broome County Legislature indicates the county will pay Spark Broome LLC \$540,000 beginning in 2020 with an annual 2.5% increase through 2034. The rent includes utilities and taxes. There is also an option for

one 15-year renewal.

“The Oakdale Mall in Johnson City is an important landmark to our community and more specifically to the village of Johnson City,” said Spark Broome vice president Doug Matthews. “We acknowledge the support of the Broome County executive, Jason Garnar, the Broome County Legislature, and chairman Dan Reynolds, for their willingness to invest in this important initiative to revitalize the mall.”

Sears vacated the building in 2017. Under the new arrangement, these two groups would be housed in about half of the upper floor of the former two-story Sears building. With the move some of the improvements needed include interior partitions, new bathrooms, new doors and flooring, and woodwork and cabinet construction for reception and break areas.

“There are brand new things that we could do there that we’ve never been able to do before,” said Garnar. “I don’t think there’s a more important mission for Broome County than to get people hired and get people back to work.”

Spark Broome already has plans for the rest of the building which will be announced at a later date.

“Ensuring that the mall remains healthy is important to our local economy,” said Matthews. “Confidential discussions are underway with our real estate division for additional tenants at the former Sears property to further our goal of helping the Oakdale Mall becoming a vibrant member of our community once again.”

Not only is this move a benefit in the county in terms of programs and quality space for its employees, but it will also save taxpayer money. While state and federal aid cover most of the rent for the OET, the county will save \$15,000 per year on its portion and the arrangement will also free up an additional \$65,000 annually for much needed job training programs.

The project has the support of the Broome County Legislature, and together the county government is working to get things done.

“The Legislature supports this effort because it is our hope to increase foot traffic at the Oakdale Mall area while greatly improving the office space for the county employees of the Office for Employment and Training. The move also keeps the former Sears property on the tax rolls, which benefits the village of Johnson City and the J.C. Central School District along with the town of Union,” said chairman Daniel Reynolds of the Broome County Legislature.

This Broome County project is also a great first step to repurposing the mall as a mixed-use complex. The employees and 1,000 job seekers who visit the OET, also known as Broome-Tioga Workforce, each month will add much needed foot traffic to the mall. The number of store closures at the Oakdale Mall in recent years has raised many questions about its future, especially with the loss of several anchor stores including Sears and Macy’s. Bringing business to the mall with the redevelopment of this space is good step for the village and Broome County as a whole.

“The current Broome-Tioga Workforce building is in serious disrepair, lacks adequate parking, and is not welcoming,” said Garnar. “This will be a great benefit to the county and the mall with new employees and thousands more visitors heading to Johnson City. Together we are taking the first step of breathing new life into the Oakdale Mall.”

Broome-Tioga Workforce

Workforce development is a priority for Broome County. In recent years a variety of programs have been developed by the county including the Opportunity Impact Program and the Clean Sweep Program, focused on filling jobs. The Opportunity Impact Program is a partnership with SUNY Broome Community College and local employers to provide a six-week training course that leads to a guaranteed job. The Clean Sweep Program is overseen by a job coach and designed to get people who are on welfare to work. Both initiatives have been very successful when it comes to filling the open jobs in Broome.

Broome-Tioga Workforce needs this new space to expand on current programs and house new ones. The local Workforce New York center offers employment-related services for employers and job-seekers, including career development programs and free job training workshops.

“At Broome-Tioga Workforce we are dedicated to providing innovative, quality training and educational solutions to the customers that come through our doors,” said executive director of Broome-Tioga Workforce, Sara Liu. “This new space is going to be transformative for our center in providing resources for the workforce in the Southern Tier.”

At Broome-Tioga Workforce leaders focus on actively connecting job seekers to local employers and available trainings, strengthening the Southern Tier region’s workforce and economy. In addition to traditional job search and resume-building offerings they specialize in programs for Veterans, youth, older adults and people with disabilities. Their solutions are customized to jobseeker’s and businesses’ unique needs.

“Our team of professionals from across the region needs a great space to work so they can be ready to assist you with all your job search and career development needs,” said Liu.

The organization is a one-stop shop for accessing employment related services for businesses, workers and job seekers in Broome County. Broome-Tioga workforce needs a building where they can thrive. The move from their facility on Front St. in Binghamton to the former Sears building at Oakdale Mall will provide just that.

Broome County plans to move into the new space at the Oakdale Mall at the end of the year.