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An era ends | An era begins

CASA purchases Jeans Westerner building

- **PEER Kindness, other nonprofits to join move**
- **Youth center envisioned**
- **Previous owners support goals**

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For years after the Omernik family closed Jeans Westerner, the cavernous building that once was home to the outdoor retail shop sat empty.

But it's soon to brim with new life — and new opportunities for nonprofits serving young people.

CASA of the 7th Judicial District (Court Appointed Special Advocates) closed on the building the last week in August, with the help of federal and foundation

loans, as well as collaboration with real estate agents and other partners.

The building, at 120 N. Selig Ave., will be CASA's new home, ideally as soon as mid-November. There, the advocacy group is also carving out space for PEER Kindness, the Montrose Suicide Prevention Coalition and other nonprofits, as well as developing a youth access center.

"It's for kids who are looking for a safe place to find support. We'll have suicide prevention (coalition) with a part-time office in there; PEER Kindness has got an office in there," CASA Executive Director Carlton Mason said Sept. 6.

"We're trying to create a space where a young person can walk in — kind of a coffee shop environment — and find a friend. ... Someone that's available, who

(Above) Board president Jim Haugsness talks about the group's plans for the old Jeans Westerner building and the variety of services CASA will have to offer. 'Well I think that the big deal for us is to be able to help the vulnerable child. Particularly the child aging out of foster care and older youth and offering them an opportunity to bring families back together in a safer environment,' Haugsness said. (Sydney Warner/Montrose Daily Press)

can sit down and have a conversation or direct them to someone in the building they should talk to.

"It's more of a friendly- family- open-type of environment."

CASA provides caseworkers for children who are the subject of dependency and neglect court proceedings in Montrose, Delta, Ouray, San Miguel, Hinsdale and Gunnison counties. These caseworkers, also called CASAs, represent the child's interests in proceedings.

The organization is currently housed on North Third

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Street but was facing increased rent. It was difficult to find other tenants to share the space because of the way the current building is laid out, Mason said.

“Our rent, while totally fair, was going to go up quite a bit because we were going to need to take the entire building. At that point, it turned out it was cheaper to purchase,” he said.

The increase was going to take CASA’s rent to about \$48,000 per year, Mason said.

Working with 1st Southwest Bank and the AJL Charitable Foundation, CASA was able to get a financing package for the 9,7000 square foot Jeans Westerner space, which will put rent at less than \$2,800 per month.

“We really put together a creative financial plan where we did access USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture) funds, but also have a \$100,000 loan at 2 percent (interest) for 10 years. We’ll work hard to pay that off and save significant interest, plus put ourselves in the position to have a lower, long-term payment,” Mason said.

Also, CASA will have more space to provide its programs, which in addition to advocacy, include supervised parent-ing time for non-custodial parents and the Fostering Futures programs for older teens who are emancipating out of the foster care system.

“Our goal is to provide an environment that is really conducive to building a positive and communicative relationship between the child and non-custodial parent,” Mason said.

The larger digs afford more elbow room for 13 staffers, too.

As a key project component, CASA is making room for other groups.

“When we looked at the building, we knew we had a little more space there than we might possibly need,” said Mason, explaining the decision to dedicate space on the east side of the building for other nonprofits who serve youths.

“The more we work together, the better we spend every dollar.”

PEER Kindness is one of the groups moving in with CASA. The organization partners with schools, youth programs, organizations and community leaders to reduce bullying and works to promote positive, encouraging, empathetic and respectful (PEER) values.

“We love working at Proximity Space. We love the collaboration, environment and location, but we need to have closer touching points with children, to be able to see kids, talk with kids and find out what’s relevant in their world today,” said Robin Shank, executive director.

“When this opportunity came for some youth organizations to get together and create a teen center, that filled the missing gap for us. With this opportunity, we’ll be able to share spaces, which also makes it easier for parents.”

Shank said she is also excited at the prospect of working with Backstreet Bagel, which is in the same building.

The long-established bagel shop previously kept the area between it and Jeans Westerner open, allowing traffic to flow between the two stores; that is set to happen again.

Mason said CASA is in discussions with Backstreet’s owners for a possible partnership to help serve those CASA and the other organizations help.

“The conversations with Backstreet have been around ‘Would it be possible to create a couple jobs for our youth?’ What it looks like, we’re still trying to figure out,” Mason said.

“The bottom line is, we’re going to get to see kids, which is awesome,” Shank said. “I’m so excited.”

Shank said that by sharing space with other organizations serving young people, it will be easier to coordinate, and

also easier for families to access those services, instead of trekking to various locations all over town to do so.

Also, once the planned youth access center comes to be, it will help PEER Kindness see kids in a context other than crisis or intervention, she indicated.

“We just think this is going to be a win-win for everyone in this community,” Shank said.

The real estate agents involved in the sale and other work to support CASA’s venture agreed.

David Kienholz of Phelps Real Estate Group represented the Omernik family in selling the building.

The original Jeans Westerner building was a behemoth at 20,000 square feet, which was good for the original retail operation, but proved difficult to market. It was “condominium-ized” into three large units, two of which sold, Kienholz said.

CASA bought the last, bringing to a close the involvement of a family that held the location over a few generations. (Steve Omernik, with help from his sister, Mary Mathis, carries on the tradition at The Great Outdoors Company on South Selig Avenue.)

“It was a good thing for the family, but it was a longtime downtown presence that came to an end,” Kienholz said. “It’s nice it will be put to a good use for a good cause. That’s what the family felt really good about.”

John Renfrow of Renfrow Realty represented CASA as the buyer.

“It closes that chapter for them (the Omerniks). It is a neat transaction because CASA is opening a new location with great publicity with a beautiful building,” he said.

“This should establish a stronger presence for CASA for generations to come.”

In addition to a 30-year fixed-rate loan through USDA and assistance from the AJL Charitable Foundation, CASA is raising funds for its buildout needs.

The Montrose Community Foundation was approached by donors who pledged \$30,000 and is now, with CASA, engaged in raising matching funds that could provide a total of up to \$60,000.

“It felt like a great community project,” Sara Plumhoff, MCF executive director said. “CASA and Carlton always do a great job of collaboration. We thought there was a need for it and we would be able to find some donors to be able to support it.”

This funding is primarily for the interior buildout, including of office spaces for the nonprofits being housed there and the installation of such amenities as a coffee bar for the youth access center.

CASA will be recognizing premium donors in the naming of areas and offices.

Money raised will help create the youth access center, the supervised and exchanged parenting time wing’s visitation rooms, a conference room available to all partners, offices for local agencies serving at-risk youths, CASA’s advocacy center and Fostering Futures space.

CASA will be moving its existing play-ground equipment that is used during supervised and exchanged parenting time, as well; this will be located in a secure, fenced area.

“We’re very excited to be able to better serve our clients and to create a safe, accessible environment for local youths that may be struggling to navigate the challenges of life,” Mason said.

Mason is available for more information at 970-901-5296 or cmason@casa7jd.org.

To donate to MCF’s matching fund efforts, contact 970-249-3900 or email montrosecommunityfoundation@gmail.com.

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