

Good news at the Interfaith Food Pantry gala

by Jamie Duffy

Sunday March 30, 2008, 7:37 PM

Exciting news was announced quietly at the ninth annual spring gala for the Morristown-based Interfaith Food Pantry held at the Brooklake Country Club in Florham Park, on Friday. Morris County Freeholder and 2005 gubernatorial candidate John Murphy said a deal had been struck to secure land at the former Greystone mental health facility in Parsippany for the pantry to construct a 15,000 square foot warehouse, consolidating operations and allowing large deliveries that have been impossible.

"We've had to turn away donations," said the pantry's executive director Rosemary Gilmartin, including a truck full of sugar that couldn't be unloaded at the West Hanover Avenue warehouse. The proposed warehouse construction estimated to cost \$1.5 million will require a capital campaign, she said.

Since 1994 when the food pantry was formed, the client list has grown to 1,500 families, Gilmartin said. Today, the pantry moves five to six tons of food a week; 14 years ago the pantry handed out 19 tons of food for the entire year, said Russ Hall, president of the board of trustees.

About 80 percent of the food is donated through private and corporate gifts.

Gilmartin says many of her clients are working poor and seniors and she is seeing the result of the increasing number of home foreclosures as those people are now knocking at the pantry's door. Recently she heard from the mayor of Dover that there are 53 homes in town in foreclosure, she said at the gala.

Murphy said Morris County had made a commitment to the food pantry years ago and the current Morristown facility is rented from the county for \$1 a year, but is neither large enough nor equipped for large truck donations.

The Greystone property -- currently a residential hall scheduled for demolition -- "will be a perfect spot," he said. The Greystone facility was deeded for open space and non-profit use two years ago. Another notable at the IFP gala, New Jersey News anchorwoman Kent Manahan, said her network had recently done a story on serious need in such affluent counties as Morris. The IFP group is a community of people "who want to help, who are looking to help ... to keep people fed and together. If we can't do the basics, we can't keep them together," she said.

The gala "Celebrating a Community of Caring," was held in honor of Kraft Foods in recognition of their help with food donations, volunteers and a \$35,000 grant that has allowed the pantry to hire a food nutritionist on staff, Gilmartin said. The grant, called "healthy choices," focuses on buying fresh food, she said.

"It's successful for us if we raise \$40,000," said Hall. "Our goal is to never turn anyone away. We do everything we can to publicize our existence. We are not a marketing organization in that we're looking to give out so many tons a week. Our goal is everyone who is qualified and needs food gets it."
