

## NEWS

# New Haven early child care group details plan to transform Cine-4 site to school

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The closed Cine-4 movie theater on Middletown Avenue in New Haven on Aug. 15.  
Arnold Gold / Hearst Connecticut Media

NEW HAVEN — Friends Center for Children Inc. plans to turn the former Cine-4 site on Flint Street into an early child care center that would serve about 80 young children, as part of a larger plan to provide affordable services for families and teachers.

The transformation will be in three phases including a renovation of the existing theater, which is planned to begin this summer for 10 months, and the other two phases including construction of two new buildings.

The Fair Haven-based group purchased Cine-4's 1.93-acre property last summer for \$1.3 million from Soffer Associates, ending the theater's operation after 51 years. The group submitted its plan before the City Plan Commission for a site plan review Wednesday night.

Executive Director Allyx Schiavone said Tuesday the existing theater building will include four classrooms, executive offices, spaces for facilities, admissions and HR and a shared storage area for each department and each classroom.

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One of the four theaters will remain on site, according to Schiavone. She said it will turn into a space for “community productions” and community space such as “joint concerts for families.”

The second phase, Schiavone said, will include a new building featuring six new classrooms and a central library — a part of which will be a mobile library open to the community.

The mobile library “will be for our programs, but also open to other early care and education providers in New Haven and it will travel around the city so that they have accessibility to books,” Schiavone said.

According to the application before the City Plan Commission, the start of the second phase is not yet known but construction will take about 12 months.

Once the first two phases are done, there will be 28 teachers on site serving 80 children age three months to three years for a full-day, full-year program.



Rendering of a proposed Friends Center for Children campus on Flint Street.  
Contributed Photo

For the last phase, Schiavone said there will be a new building but “we don’t have clarity at this point in terms of what the use of that building will be.” She said it’s important for the organization to “respond to the needs of the community.”

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“We want to pause and really reflect and get some community input on what our community wants,” Schiavone said, referring to the Friends Center’s and Greater New Haven’s needs. “We don’t know if there’ll still be a shortage for infant toddlers, preschool needs, training needs for educators. We just don’t want to make assumptions now for five to seven years from now.”

Asked about the need for space, Schiavone said New Haven is “a child care desert” for infants and toddlers, and families need the care with a sliding-scale tuition.

“We have an extensive amount of families who are calling us every day looking for infant, toddler care,” she said. “There are approximately two spots for every 10 families looking for care — and that’s if you can afford it.”

Besides providing for students and families, Friends Center also aims to offset costs for its teacher as it’s working on an initiative to provide 26 rent-free housing units within five years.

Schiavone said the center currently has six units of such for six families. The initiative began as the center was exploring how to raise salaries without raising tuition for parents and without creating a deficit, Schiavone explained.

“We surveyed our teachers and we asked them what their biggest expenses were,” she said, and it was housing. Out of 28 teachers surveyed, only one owned a home, according to Schiavone.

“We decided that we were going to figure out how to offer free housing to our teachers so that they take their base salary and then they get free housing, which is basically a salary benefit,” she said.

Friends Center for Children Inc. is headquartered on East Grand Avenue with another location on Blake Street. Besides the old theater site, the group has purchased an office building in Westville and also planned to open another child care center at Dixwell Plaza.