

Mentor program to move downtown

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Big Brothers Big Sisters to gain space, increase visibility at historical hotel

By Sarah Colburn
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The local office of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Minnesota is moving to downtown St. Cloud.

Employees of the organization that pairs children with mentors plans to leave its location near the Stearns History Museum in December or January.

"It's going to open up an opportunity to network with the downtown businesses," said Troy Fritz, executive director of the organization.



It might be a source for a lot of new big brothers and big sisters."

Fritz expects the new locale on Sixth Avenue North to increase the organization's visibility.

The building is the former Spaniol Hotel, and it's on the National Register of Historic Places. Two months ago, building owners Peg and Larry Meyer approached Fritz about the possibility of the organization renting the space.

Space crunch

The lease on its current building at 3339 West St. Germain St., expires at



Times graphic by Mark Marshall, mmarshall@stcloudtimes.com

year's end. Fritz had just begun to think about space needs when the Meyers approached him two months ago.

Big Brothers Big Sisters has been in the community for 35 years. Five years ago, the agency served 193 children. In 2003, it served almost 900.

"We anticipate that growth to continue at a fairly rapid pace for many years yet," Fritz said.

That means more employees.

"Our staff is kind of at that point where we need to grow," Fritz said.

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There are 13 employees in the office including interns and AmeriCorps staffers.

The West St. Germain Street office measures 21,066 square feet. The new space will give the staff an additional 12,000 square feet for storage and desk space.

In the current building, the conference room has been taken over by cubicles, forcing staff to meet with parents and children in their offices where there's occasionally confidential material.

More freedom

The new building brings with it enough room for a few meeting rooms for visits, a larger reception area, a child activity space and a conference room.

Cheryl Gerads is a case manager for Big Brothers Big Sisters and has witnessed the shrinking amount of available space in the current office. She's excited about the move and about what it may mean for clients who don't have transportation.

"I think that a lot of our clients are from that side of town," she said.

It gives clients better access to bus routes and some are within walking distance of the office, she said.

Fritz anticipates the organization may do some fund-raising to make changes to the inside of the building.

However, Big Brothers Big Sisters will rent the new space for less than market value, Fritz said.

The Meyers have been financial supporters of the organization and Larry Meyer has been a big brother for four or five years.

Historic look

The outside of the building is getting a facelift per the request of the Meyers.

They're working with GLT Architects to renovate the facade and return some of the historical character the hotel had at its



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opening in 1926.

They began by working from a photograph of the hotel. The windows on the upper floors of the building haven't changed through the years; the stone lintels are still there, as are the original metal plates that once held canopies over the doors.

The task will be to replace the 1970s and 1980s-era facade with a modern version of the original design, said David Leapaldt, president of GLT Architects.

The drawings of the renovation should be complete this month. Then the building permit process and contractor selection process will begin.

"It's going to make a big impact in how that building appears," Leapaldt said. "We're starting to see people come back and do this, renovate these buildings and take a historic approach."