

## YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE BIG PLANS FOR NEW CENTER

[7 HARTFORD NORTH FINAL Edition]

Hartford Courant - Hartford, Conn.  
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Date: Oct 10, 1996  
Start Page: B.4  
Section: METRO HARTFORD  
Text Word Count: 537

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### Document Text

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The 80 city young people who streamed through the new Pope Park Recreation Center for a pre-opening tour Wednesday gave city recreation counselor Jose Caraballo a break when he wandered through fielding questions.

There was only one question. It came at him from all directions, in English and Spanish:

"When does it open?"

Nov. 9 is the tentative date, but the city opened the \$5 million center for a few hours Wednesday afternoon to let young people from Frog Hollow and other neighborhoods take a look around.

Most were wide-eyed and making plans.

"I'm going to swim, play basketball and maybe volleyball," said Kenaisha Jouet, 10, who lives a few blocks from the center. "I can't wait."

"This is a good thing to have, because all the kids might stay away from the streets now," said Miguel Anaya, 11.

The Frog Hollow center -- a bright-gold hulk perched in a corner of Pope Park -- has an indoor Olympic-sized pool, a gymnasium, a multipurpose auditorium and a game room with ping-pong tables, pool tables and Foosball. It will be open year-round to children and families in the city.

The city's recreation and youth services division is still working out programming, but Caraballo reeled off a list of possibilities: family movie nights, basketball leagues, water polo, cooking classes.

"This is a place for family enrichment," said Ramon Rojano, city human services director. "We want it to be a place that helps to strengthen families."

Planning for the center started in 1992, when Edgar Villarroel, a community organizer in Frog Hollow, and a handful of other residents began seeking funding for a center that could serve as an alternative to gangs.

With support from Hartford Areas Rally Together and community leaders, the city secured about \$3.8 million in state funds and additional money from a park trust fund.

Construction began in 1994 and was supposed to be finished last December. A series of delays pushed back completion.

The center will be open weekdays from 3 to 9 p.m. and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. It will be staffed by recreation division employees. The city also will look for parent volunteers, said Penny Leto, who has overseen the project for the recreation division.

After Wednesday's tour, the young people got some coaching from Deputy Mayor Frances Sanchez. He told them, "This belongs to you. You are the owners. And we hope to keep it for a long time as beautiful as it is today."

The kids offered programming suggestions that included drill teams, roller-skating and talent shows. Parents in the neighborhood had been invited for a tour earlier this month.

Jose Martinez, a member of HART who has monitored construction of the center, smiled as he watched the center fill with children.