

T-Mobile Donates \$50,000 to VFW Post in Wisconsin for Freedom Park Center

'It's a great project for our community, for our veterans, seniors and youth and everyone else involved'

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In Wisconsin, the New Richmond City Council chambers were filled with veterans and their family members along with city staff and representatives from T-Mobile to celebrate the donation of \$50,000 to VFW Post 10818's Freedom Park Center project on Thursday, Dec. 15.

The donation is one of 100 Hometown Grants awarded by the telecommunications company to "help build, rebuild, or refresh community spaces that foster local connections" in communities across the country.

When completed, Freedom Park Center will be a 17,400-square-foot facility that will house a veterans center, senior program center and park facilities and community center in the city of New Richmond.

The project is located on 5 acres of land in Freedom Park with a patio and healing garden overlooking Hatfield Lake. The project is currently scheduled to be completed in 2023.

Mayor Jim Zajkowski acknowledged building Freedom Park Center has experienced its share of ups and downs over the last nine years, but the project has gained considerable momentum in 2022 with a large grant from RCU, proceeds from a benefit concert and now T-Mobile's donation.

"This isn't easy. When a building is completed, people don't always appreciate how it got there," Zajkowski said. "It takes a lot of hard work, a lot of meetings and a lot of ups and downs. In the last year we've seen a lot of ups and we want that to continue through the

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completion of this project in 2023. It's a great project for our community, for our veterans, seniors and youth and everyone else involved. That's why T-Mobile got involved, that's why they decided to give the \$50,000 because they saw what it can do for our whole community."

Vietnam veteran Dave Green, one of the Post's project managers, explained that as St. Croix County has grown over the last decade so has the Post's membership from 144 to over 450 veterans as well as the number of organizations serving veterans.

The Post envisions Freedom Park Center as a facility available to all veterans groups.

"Make no mistake. It's not just the VFW," Green said. "The veteran's center is an opportunity to have all veterans organizations working together under one roof."

St. Croix County Veterans Services Officer Phil Landgraf noted there are now more than 5000 veterans living in the county and that number is only expected to grow.

The Post's project coordinator, Vietnam veteran Ken House, walked the audience through the unique history of how the Freedom Park Center project came to be.

"On July 19, 2019, VFW Post 10818 got permission from the Department of Defense to borrow any branch of the military to create Freedom Park Center until Sept. 30, 2024," House said.

Post 10818 was able to convince four local contractors, Derrick Construction, Simon Electric, Countryside Plumbing and Heating and Total Excavating to voluntarily train soldiers in various construction skills in partnership with the Department of Defense's Innovative Readiness Training.

The Post then was able to employ the program to build the largest military-assisted construction project in the history of Wisconsin.

This unique partnership pairs soldiers with local contractors whose hands-on instruction guides and prepares soldiers in a multitude of disciplines from engineering and surveying to heavy equipment operation, masonry, electrical and plumbing all in service of providing key services with lasting benefits for American communities.

Each summer since 2018, residents have welcomed the soldiers to Freedom Park to construct roadways, a trail and prep the site on which Freedom Park Center would be built. Infrastructure including water and sewer were completed last summer ahead of final construction scheduled for the summer of 2023.

"We are on schedule for training 1,000 soldiers this next summer to complete Freedom Park

Center,” House said.

Jason Joppa, rural market manager, expressed how appreciative T-Mobile was to be a part of the Freedom Park Center project.

“T-Mobile has awarded four of these grants in Wisconsin, but I don’t think I have ever been as humbled as I have been by the presentation today,” Joppa said. “You have told us how grateful you are and told us thank you in so many different ways. You’ve heard all the benefits this project will have for the community. We are honored and very thankful to be a part of this amazing project.”

Story and photo by Tom Lindfors/Hudson Star Observer.