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FOCUS: CONSTRUCTION, DESIGN & ARCHITECTURE

Met site to nurture startups

By Denise Perreault, **PBN Staff Writer**

Imagine starting your own business while still in high school, with not only the school's faculty and staff available for advice but classroom space specially designed and constructed to help make it happen.

Such will be the enviable situation facing students of the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center, better known as The Met, in 2010 when an entrepreneurial center that has just been designed opens on the Providence campus of the alternative public high school.

The brainchild of Dennis Littky, co-director of The Met, the center will function as a business incubator to encourage students to create their own business opportunities and develop plans for launching them. A unique aspect of the project will see Met students raise the building themselves, just as neighboring farmers would once get together to raise a barn.

"We want to involve the students," said **Ron Stevenson**, lead architect on the project, who works for the Cranston architectural firm of **Saccoccio & Associates Inc.** "The raising will be a big deal for the students, like an old barn-raising." The structure, he said, will be mostly assembled, so students only will have to lift and put it together.

The stand-alone, one-story building of 3,900 square feet, slated to cost about \$1 million, includes eight work rooms, a conference room, offices, an art gallery at the entrance and a common "incubator" space of 28 by 28 feet, which makes up most of the structure, according to an architectural plan.

If a student wants to start a T-shirt business, for instance, then the wide-open incubator space could be used to package and ship the shirts, Stevenson explained. "It's a very well-lit space, with lots of plugs and outlets," he said of the incubator area, which is in the center of the building and surrounded by the individual work rooms.

It was Littky's idea, Stevenson said, to build the structure using a "heavy-timber post and beam" construction style, with exposed wooden beams such as those seen in old farmhouses or barns. From the exterior, the building will have a residential look, Stevenson said, but inside, it will be all industrial.

Ceilings will be high and open, as in a loft, the floor will be concrete and the work rooms will come with portable walls so each can be made larger if needed. Translucent interior walls in each work room will let in light from the incubator space. A large conference room will be able to accommodate meetings for as many as 30 people, Stevenson said. The center will be "insulated more than most buildings," he said, because structurally insulated panels (SIPs) will be used on the walls and roof to help save on utility costs.

The center will be air-conditioned for year-round use and, in the winter months, heat will radiate from under the floor, "to keep the floor and the whole space warm," taking full

advantage of the fact that heat rises, Stevenson said. "Everything has been designed for sustainability," he explained.

Design plans for the center were completed last week, and the project has yet to obtain approvals from the appropriate state building and fire officials, according to Stevenson. Once those approvals are received, the project will go out to bid and plans call for ground to be broken before winter. Construction would end in late spring, hopefully while school is still in session so students will be on hand to participate in raising the building, Stevenson said.

From an educational point of view, Jodie Woodruff, director of the Center for Entrepreneurship, described the program as "an engaging avenue to capture the creativity and enthusiasm of students in an effort to build math and financial literacy skills, work force development skills and life skills through something most students identify with; their interests and making money.

"This concept has been tested and proven through two-year pilot programs at The Met," she added. "The new Center for Entrepreneurship will allow us to take this work to the next level, reach out to the community, and offer students the opportunity to learn and operate a business."