



JEFF TAYLOR/The Winchester Star

Women walk by The Laurel Center at North Cameron and Baker streets in Winchester on Friday.

Laurel Center plans to resume construction

By **JOSH JANNEY**
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WINCHESTER — The Laurel Center's plan to construct a new building on Cameron Street had been stalled for nearly four years due to lack of funds, and its executive director said this week the project will be able to resume construction this spring.

The center provides shelter for women — and their children — who are victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. Its new 22,500-square-foot building on North Cameron Street is still just a shell, for now. The three-story building will house the organization's administrative offices and provide 32 beds for women and their children seeking shelter.

Executive Director Kaye Harris said that work on the interior will begin May 1 under Howard Shockey & Sons Construction. The cost of building the interior is \$2.1 million.

Harris said it cost the center \$3 million to do the groundwork and build the shell of the building. The shell was also built by Howard Shockey & Sons Construction, and it was completed in 2013. Harris said The Laurel Center had to take a loan of between \$750,000 and \$1 million from the Bank of Clarke County to do the work, but all but \$40,000 of the loan has been paid off.

The Laurel Center's current building in Winchester, which Harris said the organization has used for 28 years, only provides enough room to shelter 14 people.

The nonprofit organization was able to shelter 139 women and children in 2016, but Harris said it had to turn away 150-200 because of a lack of space. Sometimes there is room at the shelter for homeless women, but Harris said that victims of assault are the

higher priority due to the emergency behind the situation.

Harris said the current shelter is a pre-Civil War building, and that it is only 5,000 square feet — 4.5 times smaller than the new building. There are three bedrooms and two bathrooms to serve the 14 people being sheltered.

Sometimes a woman with four or five children may get a bedroom to herself, according to Harris, but most of the time, families share bedrooms.

"We just don't have enough space," Harris said. "We've had women who've been here who have said, 'It would be so nice to have that new building.' Because the accommodations here are not really that nice. It's an old building. It's kind of run down. There's not a lot of privacy."

The current shelter is unable to serve people with walking disabilities because of tight spaces and a lot of stairs. Since the shelter was grandfathered by old rules, it does not have to meet the current standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The new shelter, on the other hand, will be handicap-accessible and will include elevators.

Though the new building's interior will cost \$2.1 million, the nonprofit organization hopes to raise \$3.1 million, so it could also cover the costs of moving in, furniture, maintenance and playground equipment. So far, \$1 million has been raised.

To help fund the construction, Harris said The Laurel Center will likely take a loan from the bank of somewhere between \$1 million and \$1.5 million. Construction is estimated to wrap up in January, with the center opening sometime in February or March of 2018.

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Once the new building is complete, the administrative offices for the nonprofit organization will also move there.

"Just being able to consolidate our programs under one roof is going to be so much more convenient for the families that we serve," Harris said.

In addition to providing shelter to women, The Lau-

rel Center also provides legal advocacy, works with other community organizations, provides violence prevention education for children and teens and has a program for children who are victims of domestic violence.

For more information on the Laurel Center, visit the-laurelcenter.org.

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