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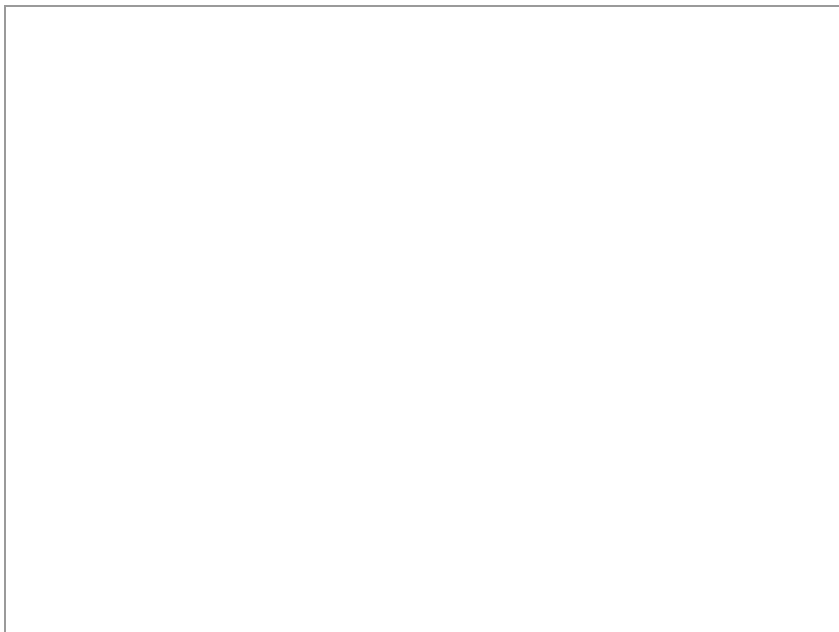
ROXBURY

Residents celebrate revival of Roxbury recreational complex

Posted by Matt Rocheleau July 1, 2011 12:08 PM

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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

Children played a mix of games and activities at the revived Melnea A. Cass Recreational Complex during Thursday's grand opening.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

All in one large room, all at once, children shot basketballs, rolled around on small bicycles and scooters, hula-hooped, and played other activities. A team of women roller-skated in circles; other groups lobbed tennis balls to one another or practiced martial arts drills.

There were soccer nets on either end of the arena. A dark-red, two-lane track lined with parents, local elected officials, area police officers and other bystanders surrounded the many on-goings on the central, light-navy blue court surface.

The multi-functional Melnea A. Cass Recreational Complex, which also features classrooms and an outdoor swimming pool, showcased its versatility Thursday when the 43-year-old Roxbury facility re-opened with a new look.

(To see photos from the grand opening, click here.)

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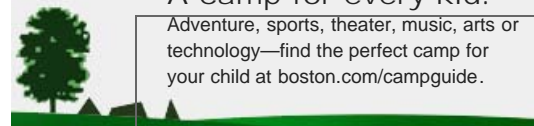
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The former ice-skating venue named after “the first lady of Roxbury” was shuttered by the state, which owns and operates the complex, two decades ago because neglect and a lack of funding led to significant disrepair and an inability to keep the center open.

The space had been vacant until state officials began a \$4.2-million project one year ago to revive the 24,000 square-foot building to its current form.

Residents had a strong presence at the dedication ceremony and ribbon-cutting. The surrounding community had, for 20 years, urged officials to revive the facility. Its lengthy vacancy was seen as one of several examples of stalled, scrapped or failed public projects and unfulfilled promises in Roxbury.

Locals pushed back and succeeded in changing initial plans announced two years ago to keep the facility an open-air structure for use as a three-season space.

As a result of their demands, residents on Thursday walked into an indoor, climate-controlled space that will be in use year-round. Some came with organized sports groups, others came as simply as neighbors.

“It’s good for the neighborhood. The kids can come over here to play,” said mother and nearby resident Juana Vittini alongside two of her three children – daughters Geyri, 11, and Giara, 8. “If we would go [to a place for the children to play] before it would have to be far away.”

An array of organized sports groups that plan to hold programming in the new center, including some groups which were instrumental in developing the reconstruction project, filled the arena.

“It’s nice to be able to have a place to practice within the city,” said the Boston Massacre roller derby team’s coach, 30-year-old Fort Hill resident and city school teacher Jessica Lider, whose derby nickname is ‘Lil Pain.’ “We’re thrilled. It’s amazing. And, we’re very excited to be a part of it.”

The 70-member, five-team Boston Derby Dames roller derby league has rarely had chances to practice within the city their group was named for when it formed six years ago. Most often, they would skate at community centers in surrounding communities and out in the suburbs. When they were in Boston, they practiced outdoors by a beach in Southie.

None of those spaces had the sport’s official floor lines and markings. The new Cass center does.

And, “This way it’s in a safer, cleaner space,” than outdoor practice areas, Lider said. Using the new space, the group also hopes to soon start a junior derby league to recruit younger skaters to the sport.

“It’s such a great and empowering sport for young women,” the New Bedford native said.

Twelve-year-old DeAunya Tavares played basketball with other children on a portion of the arena set aside with games and activities for the younger crowd.

But, she was not shy about venturing to the other half of the 235-by-105-foot room where sports groups of varying ages were practicing. There, she spoke to the derby coach and later said she’s interested in trying out the junior derby league and, of the new facility, she added, “I like it. It gives kids stuff to do.”

Members of the Franklin Park Tennis Association said the new arena, which has its own nets and tennis court markings, will allow the group to be more

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flexible and even expand its program offerings.

“It makes a huge difference for our program,” said Jeannine Laing director of the tennis association that was founded in 1998 at the Shattuck Grove Courts in Franklin Park and has branched out to several other courts in the city.

“We’ve had limited court space in the past.”

Nadine Muhammad brought three of her four children, 7-year-old Khalif and Alaila and Ali, who are both 9. The young trio belongs to the Peace and Kaos Martial Arts Academy, which will use the new Roxbury recreational facility as one of its practice arenas.

“It’s beautiful. I didn’t even know they were doing this much to it,” the Dorchester mom said. “It will offer a lot of different programming to people.”

The complex has a central entryway, an insulated roof, brick walls, restrooms, showers and locker rooms – all of which are new. Membership to the recreational center is free, though some program offerings do charge fees.

A pamphlet from the state’s conservation and recreation department on the main lobby’s desk listed the facility’s planned and potential uses: soccer, football, roller skating, inline skating, tennis, gymnastics, kickboxing, art classes, music classes, performances, yoga, wrestling, martial arts, dance, walking clubs, group fitness classes, movies and other community events.

About the only activities not available are ice skating and ice hockey. But, a new indoor ice rink, which can also covert into a turf field andreceived city redevelopment approval earlier this month, is being planned in nearby Jackson Square.

Governor Deval Patrick, who announced funding for the site’s rehabilitation in early 2010, attended the ceremonies Thursday alongside a slew of state and city elected officials. Patrick and the other local leaders said the center will provide a safe haven for area youth as well as help promote health and fitness. Officials praised the community spirit that drove the effort to see the long-awaited project completed.

“That is something you’ve got to hold on to,” Patrick said of the neighborhood’s passion. “That is something you’ve got to celebrate.”

(To see photos from the grand opening, click here.)

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