



Newly expanded YMCA marks its official opening

Guests say \$23 million expansion was worth the wait

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ANDOVER — Gary Morelli first heard the complaints in 1997, when he began his job as executive director of the Andover/North Andover YMCA.

Back then, the Y had become outdated since it opened on Haverhill Street in 1974. Members grumbled about lack of workout space and the inability to earn a spot in certain fitness classes, among other gripes.



Morelli promised those members a new and improved Y would come. Nearly 20 years later, the promise has been delivered.

The newly renovated and expanded Y officially was welcomed into the community on Thursday, as Morelli, now president and CEO of the Merrimack Valley YMCA, and other organization dignitaries participated in a public ribbon-cutting ceremony.

Nearly 150 guests turned out for the event, including public officials from both Andover and North Andover and members of the Y's Building Committee and Board of Directors. General members were also invited to attend the ceremony, which lasted about an hour.

Although Thursday marked the official opening of the new building, members of the Andover/North Andover branch have enjoyed the space since January, when most of the construction was completed.

Prior to the recent renovation, the Y had received small enhancements over the years. Administration realized a major makeover was necessary about a decade ago.

After roughly two years, the \$23 million project yielded a modern-day Y, complete with new swimming pools, fitness studios and workout equipment. The building has doubled in size and now sits at 109,000 square feet.

On Thursday, the community gathered to hear from the people who helped make the yearslong dream a reality. The ceremony took place on the entry-floor of the new building and began shortly before 10 a.m.

Executive Director Alex Turek served as the master of ceremonies for the ceremony and kicked off the morning with a welcoming address. He expressed his appreciation toward all of the staff and facilities management personnel who worked on the project, as well as the members, who "put up with all of this over the last few years."

Turek also thanked Morelli for bringing him on board to the Y and giving him an opportunity to be a part of the renovation project.

"This (renovation) is something that only comes around maybe once in a career," Turek said. "I'm very thankful to be a part of it."

Morelli then took the podium and gave his lengthy list of thank-yous, including to those who donated their own money to help bring the new Y to life. Out of the \$23 million it took to build the new facility, \$8 million came from donors.



"We're so very fortunate to have had your support; you are the leaders and the visionaries," Morelli said of the donors in attendance. "Getting our first major donations was huge for this project, and this project could not have happened without you."

There were more speakers after Morelli, including Don Schaalman, a member of the building committee, and Joseph Alwan, chairman of the board for the Andover/North Andover branch, who each shared personal stories of how the Y has impacted both them and their families and friends.

Other speakers included Dianne Anderson, president and CEO of Lawrence General Hospital, and Dr. Kyle McInnis, professor at Merrimack College. Both Lawrence General and Merrimack have begun new partnerships within the branch.

State Sen. Barbara L'Italien, D-Andover, presented Morelli with a citation from the state celebrating the Y's opening. Other state delegation in attendance included state Rep. Frank Moran, D-Lawrence, and representatives from the offices of state Sen. Kathleen O'Connor Ives, D-Newburyport, and state Rep. Diana DiZoglio, D-Methuen.

Following the ribbon-cutting, guests were offered the chance to tour the new building and see the improvements themselves. Tables with information packets were available on each floor and in front of each new feature, including the Lawrence General rehabilitation center and The Active Living Center for Older Adults, a fitness area specifically for seniors.

While the road may have been long, the final destination -- the new Y -- was well worth the wait, according to those who spoke on Thursday.

"We saw the process, we knew the challenges....but we had confidence that the end result would be remarkable, if not spectacular," Schaalman said in his speech. "And here we are today...we were right."

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