

March 18, 2009

Little Chute banks on windmill project for spin

*By J.E. Espino
Post-Crescent staff writer*

Little Chute native Janet Verstegen doesn't bat an eyelid as she envisions how her village will look in a few years.

Busy storefronts in a 1950s atmosphere through the downtown. New businesses on the east side of Main Street and on the north side, along the U.S. 41 corridor. Tourist dollars steadily trickling in.

Call her vision, and that of scores of other ardent supporters of revitalizing the Dutch heritage, the windmill effect.

"Many smaller communities aren't as fortunate as us to have a downtown as compact as ours, plus we're getting a tourist attraction," Verstegen says with a grin.

It's difficult to say how soon the hopes and grand visions of many Little Chuters will materialize. What's certain is that the windmill is on its way, and it promises to change the landscape on Main Street.

An icon much like historic St. John Nepomucene Catholic Church has been since the 1860s, the windmill will stand 100 feet tall in the area of Main and Monroe streets.

It has been ordered and should begin to arrive in the states in pieces in the fall. Opening is slated in 2010.

Plans already are in place to move forward in late spring or early summer with the construction of the visitor center and the windmill's base.

The business windfall translates into improved quality of life for property owners.

"The options for the people living in the village certainly increase. The additional tax revenues coming in from successful businesses have a major impact on quality of life," said Mike Van Asten, who owns the downtown Save-A-Lot grocery store and serves on the windmill board as vice president.

The windmill offices will temporarily relocate to Vanderloop's Shoes as construction gets under way, said Robin Dekker, windmill executive director.

The Little Chute Windmill board of directors for the past two years has put the cost of the project at \$2.5 million, a figure that may have to be adjusted higher when the committee recalculates costs.

Funds raised in the past four years total about \$2.1 million. Fundraising has been slow coming in the past several months.

It's no small task for a community of about 11,000 Van Asten said.

"This is a major, major project for a very small village when we think about just the idea of raising the funds on a \$3 million project," he said.

Dekker says the state's economic downturn has had no negative effects on fundraising. Rather, if there was a slowdown it was due to the uncertainty of the project temporarily relocating last summer to Island Park.

She adds that the exchange rate between the dollar and euro has gone in the project's favor.