

# YMCA getting new home

## Group signs lease for spot in Ford Park of Commerce at I-95



Developer Lamar Smith in front of the building that will house the new and expanded Richmond Hill YMCA in 2010.

The Richmond Hill YMCA is on the verge of expansion. This past week the group signed a lease to move into a 10,000-plus square foot facility inside developer Lamar Smith's Ford Park of Commerce, near the intersection of Hwy. 144 and I-95.

For the last ten years, the Richmond Hill facility has been in the small and often overlooked storefront next to Southcoast medical on Ford Avenue. The group looks to move and open the doors of the larger Ford Park facility by early next year.

The new facility is slated to include a huge fitness area, exercise/aerobic room, locker rooms with showers, a daycare room and more.

In addition to the 10,000 square foot building, developer Lamar Smith has donated 1,000 square feet of land immediately behind the facility, according to the YMCA of Coastal Georgia Vice President Joel Smoker.

"We took that parcel off the market so that the Y can maybe build an athletic field there," Smith said. "We're very excited about the YMCA coming to Ford Park. It should make a big difference for the youth in Richmond Hill."

Former YMCA Bryan County Director Tony Welch, who helped put this deal together, said he fell in love with the site while driving around looking for a potential spot for a bigger facility.

"When I drove out of the complex and saw Lamar Smith's name on the realty sign, I just knew this would come together," Welch said. "Lamar has always been a huge supporter of our organization and he has been a great help with this expansion."

The Ford Park building will not be the permanent home for the Richmond Hill YMCA. Welch said the group will most likely "use it for four to six years until the economy picks up and then hopefully move into a permanent 30-40,000 square foot site." Smith said a five year lease was signed with an option for five more.

The Ford Park is visible to passers by on I-95, which Smith said will create ideal visibility for the new YMCA facility.

Smith said signing the Y to his new development park makes good business sense too because it creates a strong anchor which should help sell the nine neighboring lots that are still available for lease.

Welch was recently replaced by Mary Arocha as the director of the Bryan County YMCA. Welch said he left on good terms and plans to work for the YMCA in another capacity.

"The transition probably could have been handled better, but it's hard for me to bicker about something that has been so good to me over the years," Welch said. "The community will love Mary. She is well qualified and should do a wonderful job."

Welch said Richmond Hill has needed a larger facility for 14 years.

"What we have on the horizon will offer a YMCA in Bryan County the caliber of which we have wanted to deliver for a very long time," said Smoker.

<http://www.bryancountynews.net/news/article/4409/>

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