

Whitneyville Cultural Commons Opens Doors Year-Round with Energy Efficient Building Upgrades

HAMDEN, Conn. - Laine Harris recognized great potential in two historic church buildings in the urban neighborhood of Whitneyville in Hamden. He and his wife Jennifer had a vision - renovate and revitalize the buildings, with the idea of establishing the Whitneyville Cultural Commons, a community center that features coworking, social and cultural events, community education programming and more. The family began renovating the beautiful structures while still allowing the small church population to continue calling the building home each Sunday.

They bought the buildings knowing significant renovations would need to be made, including new air conditioning and heating systems to make the center operable year-round.

Harris quickly realized the project would come at a high a cost for a budding non-profit, but the necessary upgrades were made possible with the help of United Illuminating (UI), a subsidiary of AVANGRID Inc. The UI Commercial & Industrial project team identified \$14,024 in incentives available through Energize Connecticut to help make the changes more financially feasible for Harris.

“We needed to get air conditioning in the building and UI presented a package that made the air conditioning and a host of other energy upgrades much more affordable,” said Harris. “With zero interest financing and no up-front costs, we could make necessary updates while investing in a more efficient building to benefit us for years to come.”

Energy efficiency upgrades included installing units with controlled air conditioning and heat pumps, pipe insulation, new energy recovery ventilation and LED lighting retrofits. The changes facilitate better overall maintenance, alleviating moisture content in the air and providing temperature control to preserve the wood and paint of the historic buildings.

As a start-up non-profit, Harris recognizes the incredible cost-savings benefits of the upgrades as well when every dollar makes a difference on the bottom line. UI estimates projected annual energy savings of \$5,655, which equates to 21,185 kWh or \$3,813 in electric savings and 1,474 ccf or \$1,842 in gas savings.

“This kind of project allows a budget-conscience organization to run more efficiently, both financially and structurally,” said Dennis O’Connor, Small Business Energy Advantage Program Administrator at UI. “Through these programs, we seek to encourage non-profit organizations, like Whitneyville Cultural Commons, to

remain a vital part of their neighborhood and provide safe, reliable resources to members of their community.”

The project became a family affair, with all hands on deck. Harris believed in this community resource center so strongly, he used his retirement savings to purchase the buildings in hopes it would benefit the entire Whitneyville neighborhood. The Harris Family and the WCC’s Executive Director Robert Sheiman are equally excited to have a resourceful and energy-efficient space for his community.

“It’s been amazing to see the growth in use of the historic properties over the last three years, for all manner of purposes. We’ve had local, Quinnipiac University graduates use space to start their first web development company Checkmate Digital and create new jobs in Hamden,” said Sheiman. “We’ve gotten to host annual dances and fundraising events from local nonprofits like Fellowship Place, Jack and Jill Foundation, BBYO and New Haven Farms. Not to mention the dozens of local arts groups and new churches bringing dances, concerts, worship and theater to Whitneyville by holding them at the WCC. It’s been heart-warming proof that a community resource center is actually needed and desired. There’s nothing more validating to this project than the consistent use of it by all members of the diverse Greater New Haven community.”

There are ongoing plans for the grounds to become the “commons” for the Whitneyville neighborhood. In addition to the old church house, Harris has his sights set on the original Greek Revival Church, which is still used by a number of local congregations.

“As we become more financially established I am looking forward to doing a similar job on the 200-year-old church next door,” said Harris. “We expect to ramp up activity in the church, there are great possibilities in energy savings in that building.”

About Energize Connecticut

Energize Connecticut helps you save money and use clean energy. It is an initiative of the State of Connecticut, the Connecticut Green Bank, Eversource, UI, SCG and CNG, with funding from a charge on customer energy bills. Information on energy-saving programs can be found at EnergizeCT.com or by calling 877.WISE.USE.

About Whitneyville Cultural Commons

The Whitneyville Cultural Commons, a non-profit corporation in Hamden, CT, allows community members a place to work, share, create, learn, play and enrich each other’s lives. A placemaker and community center for the Whitneyville neighborhood, it features coworking space, arts and cultural programming and rental spaces, all overlooking Lake Whitney.