Atlanta Community Food Bank plans big new facility

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The Atlanta Community Food Bank is on the move.

It has outgrown its current facility on Joseph E. Lowery Boulevard on the Westside, where it has been since the mid-1980s. After looking at more than 50 sites, the Food Bank has selected a 64-acre site inside Interstate 285 off of Camp Creek Parkway in East Point to build a much larger facility to serve people in the 29-county region of metro Atlanta region and north Georgia.

The nonprofit is in the midst of a $51.4 million capital campaign with most of it going towards site acquisition, construction of a new facility, furniture, equipment, technology and fleet expansion.

When the Food Bank completed its last significant expansion in 2004, it anticipated the facility being able to handle a volume of 40 million pounds of food a year. We zoomed past that estimate of what we could handle in this building,” said Kyle Waide, who has been president and CEO of the Atlanta Community Food Bank since June 2015 and joined the organization three years earlier. “We are distributing 70 million pounds. We doubled our volume between 2012 and 2015.

After determining that it could not expand at its current site and that it did not make operational sense to have two different facilities, the Board unanimously decided to look for a new site for the Food Bank, which has about 165 employees.

“We went and visited food banks that had expanded in the past five years – Dallas, Houston and Chicago,” said James Dallas, the Food Bank’s board chair and president of James Dallas & Associates. “It was unrealistic to think we could expand with the existing four walls.”

The current facility is on a 5-acre parcel and has a total of 130,000 square feet. Although the Food Bank has 20 trucks, the existing building only has four usable truck loading docks. The new facility will have 30 loading docks and about 345,000 square feet – which will allow the Food Bank to triple its volume. “Hunger remains an urgent problem in our region,” Waide said. “The need in our community is going to grow, even today with full employment. We are distributing 61.6 million meals to 10 people each year. But there are still 50 million meals missing from the tables of the people we serve. We know we need to do more to double the food we have accessible to the people we serve.”

Atlanta’s philanthropic community is responding to the Food Bank’s proposal for a new facility. The campaign cabinet is co-chaired by Steve Cannon, CEO of the AMB Group; Andrew Cathy, senior vice president and chief people officer for Chick-fil-A; and Ingrid Saunders Jones, retired president of the Coca-Cola Foundation as well as a former senior executive at the company.

The Joseph B. Whitehead Foundation (part of the Robert W. Woodruff Family of foundations) has made a $5 million commitment to the project – which equals the largest gift ever received by any food bank in the country. “We have in hand philanthropic commitments of $26 million,” Waide said. “Outside of Whitehead, we received eight additional commitments of at least $1 million.”

The Food Bank board and its campaign cabinet contributed $1.5 million.

The Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation gave $2 million. The other $1 million gifts included the Coca-Cola Foundation, Chick-fil-A Foundation, the Delta Air Lines Foundation, the Parrish Foundation, the Zeft Foundation and the Wilbur and Hilda Glenn Family Foundation.

“We have an additional $10.5 million from the New Market Tax Credits that closed last week,” Waide said in an interview on Sept. 25. That means the Food Bank has raised nearly $37 million, and that does not include the proceeds of the prospective sale of its current facility on the Westside, which recently has become a much more desirable area for development.

The Food Bank is working with C.B. Richard Ellis to sell its current 5-acre site. It also owns the adjacent 970 Joseph Lowry building, which has 65,000 square feet and sits on an additional 2.5 acres.

“We are contemplating our options with the 970 building,” Waide said.

The first priority for the Food Bank was to find a site for a new facility and launch its fundraising campaign before selling off its existing property.

“We are thrilled with where we have landed,” Waide said. “It’s a fantastic location that’s accessible to partners and volunteers throughout the region. We are close to several major roadways, and its accessible to intown communities.”

Waide said the new facility will have 500 parking spaces and loading areas that will be situated on 30 acres of the 64-acre site. It intends to replant 10 acres of trees as well as preserve the remaining 34 acres. “We are pressuring our contractors to do everything they can to minimize their disturbance,” Waide said.

The new facility also will have several other amenities – expanded space for volunteer activities including a food processing area and a learning kitchen.

But most importantly will be the Food Bank’s ability to handle more fresh produce and frozen foods.

In 2008, less than 15 percent of its volume was fresh or frozen food. Today, it represents 43 percent of the volume, but the existing building has limited refrigerated space. “The new facility will have 40,000 square feet of refrigerated space and 28,000 square feet of freezer space,” Waide said.

The new facility is expected to cost a total of $42.2 million. Also $6.15 million will go towards expanding the Food Bank’s distribution network – including pilot community food centers to fill the gaps in its current system. The remaining $3 million of the campaign will go towards developing programs to help solve food insecurity through nutrition education, healthcare access and other resources to help clients become more self-sufficient.

“We can become a portal for other services when they come for food,” Dallas said. “When we feed the stomach, we can open up the mind.”

Construction on the new facility should begin in the next several weeks, and the Food Bank expects to move into its new home in the spring of 2020.

“The Food Bank has been incredibly successful for 39 years – thanks to bold leadership, big ambitious goals, embracing innovation, partnership and collaboration with the community,” said Waide, giving credit to founding Bill Boling. “The future of the Food Bank is extremely bright. It’s driven by our commitment to ensure that all people we serve have the food they need.”