





BRIGHTON — After years of planning and much anticipation, the Department of Elder Services opened the doors to its new senior center, a 17,500-square-foot facility set on 7.5 acres on the Brighton Reservation, on May 24.

Hundreds gathered outside the building, braving the midday heat to celebrate the occasion.

“It took over 10 years for the planning and a lot of hard work from the whole Seminole Tribe to complete this,” Tribalwide director of Elder Services Vickey Huff said. “A facility like this is a place for the seniors to come and interact with other seniors. We’re glad to see it here.”

Led by Huff and Chairman James E. Billie, councilmen, staff and royalty lined up to cut the ribbon, signifying the official opening of the facility, which offers billiard tables, miniature golf, shuffle board, horseshoes, sewing machines, ceramics and walking trails, among other activities.

“We hope more seniors will come and enjoy all the activities we have to offer,” Brighton site manager Patricia Yates said. “It’s always nice to see the seniors come in and utilize all our services.”

The building was developed under the direction of architect Michael Noell and his company, MSN_Architecture LLC, based out of Boca Raton. The building is also LEED Gold-Certified, meaning it has been recognized as green and in the highest standard for measuring sustainability, making it environmentally friendly, according to the Natural Resources Defense Council’s website.

Speakers during the grand opening ceremony - including Huff and Brighton Councilman Andrew J. Bowers Jr. - credited Leah Minnick as an instrumental figure in the establishment of the facility. The former Elder Services director retired in February but spent 35 years with the department in various capacities, organizing trips and activities for seniors and fighting for a new senior center.

“Leah was a role model to me, as well as to the other staff,” said Huff, who started with Elder Services 24 years ago as their secretary. “She showed me everything. If it weren’t for her, I don’t know where I would be.”

Minnick took the opportunity to thank the Seminole Tribe for the opportunity to work for Elder Services for her entire career and encouraged seniors to utilize the new facility.

“Please come here,” she said. “I don’t care where you’re from because this building was built with all the Seminole seniors in mind.”

After the ribbon-cutting ceremony, attendees ate lunch in the dining area and toured the building.

“Touring the whole place didn’t seem like you’re in Brighton,” former Tribal Chairman Mitchell Cypress said. “It seems like you’re out in Colorado somewhere...at a ski lodge. I need to find me a homesite here so I can enjoy this building.”

The mission of Elder Services is to provide Tribal elders with various services to encourage a long,

healthy life, enhanced self-esteem and socialization skills, as well as to promote positive acculturation. Yates said the building will allow for just that. She said the facility is a place where seniors can keep busy and mingle with peers.

For Jr. Miss Seminole Jaryaca Baker, the opening of the grand senior center is a well-deserved luxury for the elders of the Tribe. She said seniors pass down Seminole traditions and culture and warrant praise for all they have taught the community.

“I feel like our elders have given us so much,” she said. “They need to be recognized as much as possible.”

The grand-opening event also featured Tribal member Stanlo Johns as the emcee, the reciting of the Pledge of Allegiance in Creek by Pemayetv Emahakv Charter School students and musical entertainment by the Andy Buster Band.

Huff said the event was a huge success, and she looks forward to the future of the department.

“This building has a lot to offer to all the seniors,” Huff said. “I’m here to serve and direct as [best] I can. My door is always open to serve all the seniors.”

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