

First Coast YMCA announces expansion into Durbin Park

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By Will Brown

The First Coast YMCA will continue its foray into St. Johns County by constructing a 40,000-square-foot branch in the Durbin Park development. The facility will be within the Flagler Health+ campus and is expected to open in late 2023.

“As you look at projections of Jacksonville and Northeast Florida growing, we always thought this is an opportunity for growth,” First Coast YMCA President and CEO Eric Mann said. “It started eight years ago when (State Road) 9B was completed. I don’t think anyone could have imagined the rapid growth since 9B was completed. It’s exciting to be a part and to be one of the institutions that helps the area become a community.”

The First Coast YMCA currently has three branches in St. Johns County: in Ponte Vedra Beach, St. Augustine and St. Augustine Beach. In 2018, it announced its first connection with what is now known as Flagler Health+ by building a 25,000-square-foot facility inside the MuraBella Flagler Health Village.

“We are thrilled about our partnership with the First Coast YMCA and the premier destination we’re building together,” said Jason Barrett, president and CEO of Flagler Health+. “Once complete, residents will have one-stop access to wellness programs that will ultimately work together to build a healthier community.”

Two years ago, when the First Coast YMCA posted an update about the Flagler Health Village on social media, one of the top comments was: “We need a new YMCA near Durbin/CR 210 area.”

Wednesday’s announcement makes that one step closer to reality.

“It’s being on a campus that has a lot of different resources the community can identify with in a central location and have access to a lot of different options, but at the same time understanding

the why and what we do,” Mann said. “It fits what’s going on in the Durbin community and having access to great wellness options and opportunities.”

Jacksonville-based ELM will be the architect for the project. The design phase is being completed. Mann indicated a general contractor will be announced later this summer.

Before shovels can go into the ground for what is anticipated to be a 12-to-14-month construction phase, the YMCA is engaging in a \$7 million capital campaign.

“Carrying out the YMCA’s cause of strengthening the First Coast is made possible by the support of our incredible community,” campaign chairman and Florida Blue Market President Darnell Smith said in a statement. “Donations of any size put us closer to our goal of building this new facility and creating healthier lives.”

The new facility will feature an indoor aquatics center, an outdoor pool, indoor track and other fitness amenities. Its programming will include camps, swimming lessons, youth sports opportunities, family programs as well as a Teen Center and KidZone.

This is the first standalone YMCA facility erected since the Barco-Newton Family YMCA in Fleming Island was completed in 2004. Mann noted that naming opportunities will be available for the Durbin location.

“It’s (about) growing in a quality way,” Mann said. “That’s what I’m hopeful for. As we look at how to continue to serve a fast-growing market, we have to be smart about it. We can’t go everywhere at one time, so we have to be strategic about where we go with program services and facilities. I’m very optimistic about the community, Northeast Florida and how the Y can continue to play a part. We have been in Jacksonville for over 111 years, so we want to continue to be relevant.”