

## Social Security Administration's Muskegon office headed back downtown

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By **Dave Alexander | Muskegon Chronicle**

MUSKEGON — The local U.S. Social Security Administration office is on the move again, this time back on Morris Avenue in downtown Muskegon.

The federal agency is moving to a new building on a 1-acre site at 340 Morris, part of a parking lot owned by the Community Foundation for Muskegon County. Construction has begun on a \$1.4 million, 11,000-square-foot single-story building, with the 28 Social Security employees expected to be in the new office in May.



Ken Stevens | The Muskegon Chronicle

The new Social Security Administration office construction site on Morris Avenue between the Hume Building and Indian Cemetery in downtown Muskegon.

The local Social Security office had been at 450 Morris in the Hume Building prior to moving to its current location at 2585 Barclay in 2000. Before it was in the Hume Building, for a number of years the federal agency was in the former MacIntosh Building just across Morris Avenue.

The U.S. General Services Administration requested bids for new office space that would be in the central business district and near public transportation, according to Andrew Haan, director of Downtown Muskegon Now. The new agency location is directly across **Morris Avenue from the Muskegon Area Transit System bus station.**

The new Morris Avenue building on what was once the Michigan Consolidated Gas property — which has been paved for parking — is being constructed by Grand Rapids developer Bob Dykstra through Missing Link Group LLC.

Dykstra's group won the bid to construct the agency's new local office, from among four proposals received by the GSA, federal officials said. Missing Link Group has a 10-year lease with the GSA for the Muskegon Social Security office.

Working with Dykstra's Main St. Development company are architects Landmark Design Group and general contractor Wolverine Building Group, both of Grand Rapids.

"It's an honor to be involved in a new project that will help maintain the development already started in the downtown and will lead to future development projects," Dykstra said in a prepared statement.

Downtown Muskegon has been going through redevelopment since the demolition of the former Muskegon Mall after the shopping center closed in 2001.

Dykstra and his development company have been involved in real estate projects in Holland and Grand Rapids. He came to Norton Shores in 2005 and was part of the Eastowne development at Seaway Drive and Seminole Road, **which ran into financial difficulties during the past recession.**

The Grand Rapids developer **also has formed NextWork Group LLC**, which is looking to develop offices of the future that provide flexible space in multiple locations. Dykstra has been exploring a downtown Muskegon location for his NextWork office concept.

The Muskegon Planning Commission gave site plan approval for the Social Security office and 53-space parking lot behind the building. The site is zoned "central business district," city officials said.

"We think this is a wonderful move for the downtown," said Chris McGuigan, president of the Community Foundation for Muskegon County. The site was sold to Dykstra's development group for an undisclosed amount.

"It would be ideal if they could have moved into an existing building but the GSA restrictions really didn't allow that," McGuigan said. She explained that the developer looked at vacant property fronting West Western Avenue but downtown development criteria require a two-story building, which was not accepted by the GSA.

The influx of new downtown workers and the traffic that would be generated through the Social Security office are seen as positives for downtown redevelopment.

"Having several dozen new employees working downtown is nothing but good," Haan said. "That provides a better market for restaurants and retailers. This will get the employees and customers downtown to see what has been happening."

With the Social Security Administration moving to the former MichCon site, the community foundation begins the task of generating development concepts and marketing the rest of the 9-acre site. The **foundation purchased the 758-space parking lot** in late 2007 from former Muskegon Mall owner Richard Perlman of Chicago for \$1.4 million.

Located between the Hume Building and the city's Indian Cemetery, the site had been headquarters of the natural gas company and was polluted over the years, including from a coal gasification plant. MichCon left the site for a location in the Port City Industrial Park but leveled the property and instituted an environmental cleanup that capped the underground contaminants.

McGuigan said the foundation is confident that the site can be developed for mixed uses from residential to retail. It has a long frontage on Shoreline Drive that is elevated, giving expansive views of Muskegon Lake.

The foundation is working with the Chesapeake Group's Howard Kohn of Baltimore, Md., to develop a plan for the property, McGuigan said. The idea is to create high-traffic activity on the site like a farmer's market, she said.

"We need to maximize the location with its elevations and lake views," McGuigan said.

Email: [dalexander@muskegonchronicle.com](mailto:dalexander@muskegonchronicle.com)