

Column: Marie Wilkinson Food Pantry in Aurora receives \$1.8 million in federal funds for expansion

By Denise Crosby
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Diane Renner, executive director of the Marie Wilkinson Food Pantry in Aurora, on Tuesday shows an architectural rendering of an expansion to the pantry building that will add 2,000 square feet to the facility, thanks to \$1.8 million in federal funding. (Denise Crosby/The Beacon-News)

I've known Diane Renner long enough to understand why Tuesday was such a red letter day for her.

From the first time I interviewed her as executive director of Marie Wilkinson Food Pantry in Aurora – and that was over 13 years ago – it was obvious what a passion she had for serving those in the community who were struggling with food insecurity.

That's why, when U.S. Rep. Bill Foster, D-Naperville, presented a check for \$1.8 million in federal funds to her in front of her staff and board members, the smile on her face was as big as some of the challenges she has faced in her tenure at Marie Wilkinson.

Those include budget cuts, a pandemic followed by gut-punch inflation and a surge in clientele far bigger than the building at 834 N. Highland Ave. in Aurora where they were being served.

In fact, those who attended this Tuesday check-passing were packed like sardines inside the pantry's so-called foyer, all of which only demonstrated just how much this federal funding was appreciated, and how it will be used.

The funding will go toward adding 2,000 square feet to the facility. As Renner quickly pointed out, that extra footage not only will provide more distribution space but also, for the first time, washrooms for guests.

And there will also be a new education room – a dream of Renner's we talked about all those years ago – where classes will be taught by partner groups for guests to help them navigate their way out of food insecurity.

“That's not just how to read or write, which is part of it, but how to cook, how to live holistically, maybe how to grow your own things,” she said.

And it's not just for guests but the general public, Renner explained.

“We are so blessed to receive it ... so excited,” she added, pointing out the project renderings created by architects Cordogan Clark, as well as a display of support letters that came from such heavyweights as the Dunham Foundation, Fox Valley United Way, The Northern Illinois Food Bank, the city of Aurora and state Rep. Barbara Hernandez, D-Aurora.

Before Foster spoke, Renner introduced Erica Jones, who used the pantry as a child and relied on it as a single mother, then came on as a volunteer and, 18 months later, is now operations manager.

“A lot of this mission,” Jones noted, “touched my heart in a very personal way.”

As it has for state Rep. Stephanie Kifowit, D-Oswego, who got to know Marie Wilkinson and her legacy when she was an Aurora City Council member and proudly pointed to an additional \$240,000 grant from the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunities which “put (the pantry) over the finish line” for this project.

The main act, however, was the big check brought from Washington, D.C., by Foster, who acknowledged the “incredible strain” that so many individuals and families are under after COVID-related support came to an end.

“Every day we shuffle around numbers and have all these big budget fights,” which makes “it easy to forget what we are fighting for,” he said of our currently fractured Congress.

“There are things like this,” Foster added, “worth fighting for.”

For Renner, those battles just got a little easier to manage.

“It is hard because every day is different. And we have to go with the flow, take the punches and pivot to meet demands,” she told me later of the hurdles the pantry and its clients face.

“This is a big deal,” she said of the check.

“Our mission has always included education, empowerment and enlightenment. But this will provide us with a venue to do this,” she said.

“I feel we are truly advancing to our mission.”