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\$250K grant says 'YES' to unique rural arts space in Granite Falls, Minnesota

The nonprofit Department of Public Transformation is renovating a building to promote a rural arts and creative economy. A grant award of \$250,000 to its YES! House project was announced last week.



Board and staff members with the Department of Public Transformation watch for the announcement by Scott Marquardt of the Southwest Initiative Foundation of a \$250,000 grant award at the YES! House on April 3, 2024. From left are: Beth Pullan, Luwaina Al-Otaibi, Hannah Holman, Heather McDougall, Anne O'Keefe Jackson and Ash Hanson. Tom Cherveney / West Central Tribune



By **Tom Cherveney**

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organization receiving the grant to renovate the YES! House in Granite Falls is the Department of Public Transformation. The grant award was presented by the Southwest Initiative Foundation which will administer the grant.

GRANITE FALLS(<https://www.wctrib.com/places/granite-falls>) — A one-of-a-kind project aimed at building the rural arts and creative economy in western Minnesota has gained a major gift toward that goal.

A \$250,000 grant from the Southwest Initiative Foundation, made possible by a gift from the **Margaret A. Cargill Foundation Fund**(<https://www.macphilanthropies.org/>) at the Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation, was awarded to the nonprofit **Department of Public Transformation**(<https://www.publictransformation.org/>) for its **capital campaign to renovate the YES! House**(<https://www.theyeshouse.org/campaign>) in Granite Falls.

“This is huge,” said Scott Marquardt, CEO of the **Southwest Initiative Foundation**(<https://swifoundation.org/>) , as he presented the award at a celebration at the YES! House on April 3.

“To grow artists, to grow businesses, and what it means to reimagine and rethink what the creative economy means is absolutely huge,” Marquardt said.

Scott Marquardt, CEO of the Southwest Initiative Foundation, said the YES! House project and work by the Department of Public Transformation to build an arts and creative economy in southwest Minnesota is getting noticed well beyond the region, as evidenced by the \$250,000 grant award that will be administered by SWIF. He spoke at a Spring Soiree event to announce the grant on April 3, 2024, at the YES! House in Granite Falls. Tom Cherveney / West Central Tribune

The YES! House is a community space being developed in a former retail store in downtown Granite Falls. Its upper floor holds two newly-developed apartments that are used to provide lodging for visiting artists and the community's [artist-in-residence](https://www.transartists.org/en/air/granite-falls-city-artist-residence) program.

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The first floor is partially unfinished, but is being used to host a variety of programming. It offers artist-hosted workshops and live theatrical and musical performances. It also hosts “learn from your neighbor” education programs, where persons who are passionate about activities from foraging for wild foods to birding offer presentations, according to Luwaina Al-Otaibi, program coordinator for the YES! House.

Ash Hanson founded the nonprofit Department of Public Transformation to support a rural arts and creative economy. What is now the YES! House building had stood vacant for most of two decades when the family that owned it offered it to her organization in 2018.

The YES! House in Granite Falls, a project of the Department of Public Transformation, is a community gathering space and arts center. Contributed / YES! House

“It was a heavy lift,” said Hanson of the work needed on the approximate 5,000-square-foot, three-story building. Thanks to fundraising and lots of volunteer help, supporters of the venture gutted the interior and replaced its plumbing, electrical and heating and cooling systems before developing the two upstairs apartments.

A capital campaign was launched in early 2020, or just before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The goals include developing co-working space, a small business incubator, performance venue, art gallery, media lab, recording studio, yoga/dance studio and a rock climbing facility.

Ash Hanson, creative executive officer of the Department of Public Transformation Contributed / Department of Public Transformation

Hanson said a group of volunteers has been working to raise funds, a campaign that was slowed by the COVID pandemic. From the start, she said the organization has refrained from taking on any large debts and has been deliberate and conservative.

“Why is it taking so long? Because we are doing our best to move at the speed of trust and not spending more than we feel confident we can secure in terms of time, capacity and resources,” Hanson said at the award gathering.

Volunteers at "demolition workshops," shown in an undated file photo, helped ready a building in downtown Granite Falls for its use as the YES! House. The capital campaign for the building's renovation into a community gathering space is ongoing, but events are now held there regularly — including the April 3, 2024, event announcing a \$250,000 grant that put the campaign at 88% completion. Contributed / Courtesy of Ashley Hanson

The \$250,000 grant brings the YES! House capital campaign to 88 percent of its goal. Heather McDougall, chair of the Department of Public Transformation board of directors, expressed optimism about raising the remaining \$113,000. “We can do this,” said McDougall while describing the importance of building the rural arts economy.

Sureporn "Suree" Sompamitwong credits support from the Department of Transformation and its YES! House with helping her realize her dream of launching a clothing brand, Art Invasionz. She spoke at the YES! House on April 3, 2024. Contributed / EA MEDIA CO

The building is already helping in that goal. Sureporn “Suree” Sompamitwong, of Worthington, told the gathering how her residency at the YES! House helped transform her life. She launched Art Invasionz, a clothing brand that features artwork addressing mental health. She is now hoping to see a community space like the YES! House develop in Worthington.

“For a town of 3,000 people to have a building like this, amazing. Every community needs to model that,” she told the gathering.

Scott Marquardt, right, director of the Southwest Initiative Foundation, presented a \$250,000 grant award to the Department of Public Transformation and its YES! House project during an event held on April 3, 2024, in Granite Falls. Board and staff members with the nonprofit organization joining him are, from left: Beth Pullan, Luwaina Al-Otaibi, Heather McDougall, Ash Hanson, Hannah Holman and Anne O'Keefe Jackson. Contributed / EA MEDIA CO

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