



Photo by Lisa Cassidy

Ellen Sturgis, executive director of the Framingham Civic League, said the organization has tremendous potential but is not where it should be.

By Liz Mineo/Staff Writer
GateHouse News Service
Thu Aug 16, 2007, 12:17 PM EDT

Civic League poised to play a bigger role

The Framingham Civic League is known for its English lessons, Saturday meals and more recently for having spearheaded the revival of community theater.

But under the leadership of Ellen Sturgis, its new executive director, the 94-year-old organization is poised to play a bigger role in town.

Sturgis, 47, who took over the job in June, would like the league to become a meeting place for the community, a popular destination where residents can meet their recreational, cultural and social needs.

"We have a lot to do," said Sturgis, acknowledging the challenges ahead. "The civic league has a tremendous potential. It's a community center, but it's not where it should be. It's underutilized by the community, and I want people to help me bring it to its highest potential."

Sturgis hopes to attract new members to the organization. Letters to 500 people in its mailing list will be sent out soon asking to renew the \$25-a-year-membership. New programs will be launched soon to entice more people to join their ranks. Among them are a Haunted House on Halloween, a weekly basketball pick-up game starting on Sept. 5 and a multi-cultural celebration on Sept. 15.

To help residents learn about the league's offerings, an Open House will be held on Sept. 9 from 1 to 4 p.m. at its headquarters on Concord Street, where those on hand could see \$20,000 worth of renovations to its auditorium. Live music will be available as well as free basketball in the gym.

With English as a Second Language classes held throughout the week, bingo on Tuesdays; and churches and soccer groups renting either the auditorium or the gym any day of the week, the league's building may seem busy, but it could be better, said Sturgis.

"We're not only a building," she said. "We're a community resource. I want people to come and use us."

Drawing new members to the league can be an uphill battle in these times of low civic participation, admits Sturgis, but while others see challenges, she sees opportunities.

The organization has to change with the times, and its mission has to evolve, she said. When the league was created in 1913, it was one of the first social organizations in town. Nearly a century later, the civic league is among dozens of social and cultural organizations in town. Sturgis doesn't want the civic league to duplicate efforts or compete with other groups.

"We need to find out what our role is and how we can work together for the community," she said.

A Stow resident who serves on its Board of Selectmen, Sturgis worked for Sudbury Valley Trustees as director of operations for seven years. She is a 2006 graduate of MetroWest Leadership Academy.

Sturgis accepted the challenge of heading the league, intrigued by the vibrancy and diversity of Framingham. Her predecessor, Rebecca Justice, left to become executive director of the American Red Cross for Greater Nashua & Souhegan Valley in October. Between Justice and Sturgis, there were two interim directors.

During her 4 1/2-year-tenure, Justice was credited with bringing stability to the organization that experienced rocky times as a former official was charged in 2000 with stealing thousands from the Framingham Civic League's coffers.

Sturgis hopes to continue the work started by Justice, and take it to the next level. Plans are under way to expand ESL classes, the league's most successful program with 300 students, by offering partial scholarships to those who need them.

But the main goal remains to have the building used to its capacity, said Sturgis, who plans to stay aboard until she helps the organization become financially stable and strengthening it and making its membership more representative of Framingham.

"The civic league is a real community resource," she said. "We want people to be part of it."

For more information, check the Web site www.civicleague.net