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\$1.5 million renovation underway at North Suburban Synagogue Beth El in Highland Park

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A \$1.5 million renovation project is underway at North Suburban Synagogue Beth El in Highland Park. (Handout)

By **Donald Liebenson**, Special to the **Tribune**

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A house of worship is in some respects like any other house: it's all about location, location, location. For decades, North Suburban Synagogue Beth El in Highland Park was not taking full advantage of one of the property's most salient features. Now, a new \$1.5 million renovation project is underway to spotlight its lakefront setting.

Begun last May and scheduled for completion in August the project involves removing the east and portions of the north walls of the synagogue's 7,000 square-foot Harold and Ruby Blumberg Auditorium, and replacing them with glass. The renovation was designed by Chicago-based architectural firm CSA Partners Ltd.

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"We're bringing the beauty of the outside into the social hall," said Karen Kesner, Major Gifts Chair on the synagogue's development team.

This is the first major renovation the synagogue has made in at least 25 years, Kesner said. In addition to the installation of the glassed walls, it will also involve freshening up the social space that is used for congregant overflow for High Holiday observances as well as for social gatherings following Shabbat services and celebrations such as bar mitzvahs and weddings.

The project also includes beautification of the synagogue's backyard, as well as expansion of the kitchen to accommodate Beth El's budding in-house catering service, Circle-of-Life Kosher Catering, which was introduced last spring in an effort to encourage members to hold their parties at the synagogue rather than outside locations.

You can call it in part the best birthday present ever. A congregant donated a substantial portion of funds for the project.

"The donor, like a lot of us, look on the temple as a second home," Kesner said. "They like to spend a lot of time here, so it was important to us to create a brighter space."

Or at least less worn.

"The carpeting is 25 years old," Kesner laughed. "It was time."

Other funds for the kitchen expansion and to construct a staging area for the catering service are coming from the synagogue's Sisterhood, Kesner said.

The contractor for the project is Northbrook-based Valenti Builders, which did renovation work at North Shore Congregation Israel in Glencoe Beth El wanted to emulate the glass walled lake views of that project.

The genesis for the renovation began five years ago, Kesner said, with the creation of a long-range master building plan. Before fundraising could begin in earnest, the economy collapsed and the plan was set aside.

"A beautiful gift like this will hopefully be a springboard for others to come forward," Kesner said. "I'm working with another donor on another project because they were so pleased we were doing this job."

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