

The Woods set to unveil renovated equine center

\$500,000 ARPA grant from county helped fund project

By SUE LOUGHLIN
TRIBUNE-STAR

Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College freshman Jessica Andres is among students benefiting from significant improvements to equine facilities on campus.

Andres, who is from Hendricks County, is pursuing equine studies, and she's also on the equestrian team.

"As a member of the equestrian team, it means a lot that we are able to have



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Ed Ferguson, equine studies department chair at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College, stands in front of new signage at the college's Equestrian Event Center on Wednesday.

such a nice facility," she said. And, she said, it will bring a lot of positive attention to the Woods equine programs.

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The renovated Equestrian Event Center is able to host more events, benefiting both the college, community and other groups and organizations.

On Saturday, Vigo County and Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College will celebrate the completion of the SMWC equine facility improvements, supported in part by \$500,000 in federal American Rescue Plan Act funding.

The private college is home to the Mari Hulman George School of Equine Studies.

In late 2023, Vigo County allocated \$500,000 in ARPA funds to SMWC to renovate and improve equine facilities.

The upgrades have enabled SMWC “to host a robust calendar of events, attracting hundreds of participants and thousands of spectators to Vigo County,” according to the college.

Those events have led to local spending on lodging, dining and services while strengthening workforce development within the equine industry, according to the college.

The investment boosts local tourism through equestrian events, fosters community engagement and supports program growth in the Woods’ equine bachelor’s programs, officials say.

In 2023, Vigo County Commissioners recommended ARPA funding for the program, which the Vigo County Council later approved by a 4-2 vote.

At the time, “There were some good questions raised, but we felt that the equine center was very unique and a unique part of our community identity,” said County Commissioner Mike Morris.

ARPA funding “is something that makes sense,” he said, and the college “has worked steadily to run an excellent program.”

Brennan Randolph, SMWC college president, thanked county officials for the support.

“We’re coming to a close on getting all this work done and that’s what this weekend is all about, to highlight to



Sue Loughlin/Tribune-Star

Kinsey Hall, a Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College junior, works with horse Mickey at the SMWC Equestrian Event Center on Wednesday.



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Jessica Andres, a freshman at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College pursuing equine studies, is a member of the college equestrian team and said it means a lot to benefit from the facility improvements at the Equestrian Event Center.

the community the investment that was made,” Randolph said. “Their support made it possible.”

Key outcomes include:

- Enrollment growth to about 50 students, more than doubling since 2021.
- Hosting 16 completed events in 2024-2025, with an additional competitive event under discussion for 2026.
- More than 935 direct participants and 1,805 spectators and family members from completed events

- Improved facilities supporting year-round use, accessibility and safety.

The ARPA funding, and assistance from READI funding, have enabled the college to create an equestrian event center that provides for more community outreach, said Ed Ferguson, equine studies department chair.

“We can have lots of different types of events throughout the calendar year,” he said, benefiting the college, community and out-

side groups.

“From an economic standpoint, having all these people come to these events directly feeds into the local economy,” Ferguson said. Some of the events and clinics are bringing in people from other states who stay in local hotels and eat at local restaurants.

“We also have a lot of kid-oriented events and camps,” Ferguson said.

Improvements include added spectator seating, a judges’ platform, ADA accessibility, painting, signage, more natural lighting and others relating to infrastructure.

SMWC is the only institution in Indiana offering a bachelor of science degree in Equine Studies and is one of about 20 programs nationwide, according to the college.

This weekend, the college hosts Intercollegiate Horse Shows Association regional competition in both Hunt Seat and Western disciplines. It will involve several colleges from Indiana and Illinois.

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