

After years of planning, Critter Barn officially announces move to new facility

Austin Metz

Special to the Sentinel. <https://www.hollandsentinel.com/>

ZEELAND TWP. — For Mary Rottschafer, the ultimate goal of the Zeeland’s Critter Barn is to provide an accessible learning experience to anyone and everyone who wants it.

After years of research, fundraisers, and countless meetings, Critter Barn is now in the final phase of meeting that goal.

The organization's original barn on Adams Street will remain open through the month of October — ending Saturday, October twenty-nine. The farm will close for the month of November and reopen at the new facility at the corner of 80th Avenue and Felch Street in December.

“We wanted to close the farm for a period of time because there are a lot of layers, a lot of physical work that needs to be done and a lot of planning that has already been done,” said Rottschafer, founder and executive director of Critter Barn. “As we get close to the end, it can be a bit unnerving, but God is in control and it will work out.”

Right now, the farm sits atop a large hill. Parking and access are especially difficult during the busy season, including the nonprofit's wildly popular "spring fling."

In an effort to make the nonprofit more accessible, an anonymous donor gifted the organization a 36 acre plot of land in Zeeland Township. The organization has been raising funds and making plans ever since.

The new farm will have a strong focus on accessibility, and that's what makes Critter Barn unique, Rottschafer said. All ages are welcome at the farm, but Rottschafer has a passion for reaching students, no matter the physical or mental restrictions they may have.

That theme has been woven throughout the new facility.

In January, the farm received a grant from the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation's National Paralysis Resource Center. The center's Quality of Life

Grants Program supports nonprofit organizations that empower individuals living with paralysis.

Critter Barn used its award to purchase seven adaptive tricycles and five activity chairs from the Rifton Equipment Company, which specializes in designing and producing adaptive equipment for people with disabilities.

The tricycles, the nonprofit wrote in a release, will offer "an exciting mode of transportation around the new farm on concrete pathways that connect multiple barns." The activity chairs will provide more hands-on opportunities with small animals like bunnies, ducklings or baby chicks — which can sit on a tray directly in front of visitors.

Critter Barn has also partnered with Lori's Voice, an organization based in Coopersville, to help connect individuals living with paralysis with the new adaptive equipment.



Mary Rottschafer, executive director of Critter Barn, answers questions from the crowd during a demonstration on sheep shearing Tuesday Feb 8. *Cody Scanlan/Holland Sentinel*

Even before the move, Critter Barn has provided unique classroom learning experiences, including a recent partnership with Rita Bos and her kindergarten class at Holland Christian's Rose Park Elementary School.

Bos said one of her class's end-of-year field trips has always been to visit Critter Barn. She decided it was time to step up the experience by partnering with Rottschafer to bring this year's kindergarten class to the farm every two weeks for a transformative educational experience.

It was a partnership that made sense to Rottschafer, a former teacher at Holland Christian.

"Some of the teachers that brought their students in the past were former colleagues of mine," she said. "I taught there and knew a lot of people from Holland Christian. That was my stomping ground."

Bos met with school leadership to create a working plan.

"I talked with our principal and our curriculum director and went out to the farm with both of them and they gave me the thumbs up," she said. "The curriculum director said one of the goals was to focus on literacy engagement. I said absolutely, we can do that."

Bos and her students visit Critter Barn every two weeks, leaving school right after lunch. The first portion of the day focuses on literacy, then students help with chores, eat a snack and get a firsthand opportunity to experience the farm.

"To see the kids and their excitement, especially the kids that are more reluctant to read out loud in the classroom, they truly come alive when the students are out there on the farm," Bos said. "I just beam watching all the cool things God is doing through this opportunity."



Children pose in front of Critter Barn’s new facility at the corner of 80th Avenue and Felch Street in Zeeland Township. *Courtesy/Tweed Baby Outfitters*

Bos and her class meet three times a week for school. She said that each day they meet, they have a countdown going for how many days until their next visit to Critter Barn.

As the organization moves closer to opening its new facility, Rottschafer said the hope is to add more partnerships with local schools to allow more students to feel that connection.

“When you work with animals on a farm, you tend to feel closer than you would seeing the animals at the zoo,” she said. “When you ask children to feed or to help clean and they can rub shoulders with the animals, there is a closeness there and it brings these children one step closer to their creator.”

Now just over a month away from opening at 80th Avenue and Felch Street, Rottschafer is excited, nervous and ready.

“This is a place for everybody and we are really excited about it,” she said. “To have this be a farm that is available to everyone is the biggest victory.”

— *Austin Metz is a former Holland Sentinel reporter.*