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Facelift for UNR

A new student union and high-tech center are coming to campus

By Daniel Riggs

The University of Nevada, Reno has been spending big bucks to give a facelift to the campus.

Jot Travis Student Union is a small, two-story building located in the middle of campus. Its bottom floor houses the university bookstore, soon to be overrun with students buying textbooks, as well as UNR merchandise, school supplies and Wolf Pack sweatshirts.

But students shouldn't get used to the JTSU. A new student union is on its way.

With over \$64 million spent on the new Joe Crowley Student Union, scheduled to open by mid-November, UNR students can look forward to many new amenities and services.

"What's been great about this project is it's had the input of many different people," said Chuck Price, director of the student union. "Especially students, but also experts both on and off campus."

The new union is a four-story building with five entrances. The first two stories will house the new bookstore, retailers and food court. The third story will have new office space for student officials, including student government groups and student publications.

The fourth floor boasts a 10,000 square-foot ballroom and two fireplaces. Two more fireplaces can be found on the third and fourth floors.

Throughout the new union is a "real big emphasis on lounge," said Kyle Zive, student union transition coordinator. "It's going to be real cool."

The new union will have a coffee house, food court and a convenience store.

"There's a mix of retail food and non-food tenants that will help to make students' lives easier," said Price.

As for exactly what shops will be in the union: "Until the regents approve a lease, we're not allowed to talk about it," said Price.

Starbucks, Keva Juice and Port-of-Subs have already been approved. There has been talk of a bank opening in the new union, but officials were unable to confirm.

“We will have a film theater—that will be state of the art—that will seat 220 people,” said Price.

With the union under construction, the theater is now a large, dusty room made of concrete with auditorium-style seating. Seats will be elevated in the back of the theater, like commercial cinemas.

There are also plans for a sports grill on the third floor.

An environmentally friendly new union has been a priority for students on campus since discussion of a new student union began.

“It was student-initiated several years ago, before the planning even got started,” Price said of the union’s green-building efforts. “We followed the students’ lead on making it a green project before it even started.”

Kendra Zamzow is president of Students and Educators for Environmental Development and Sustainability, or SEEDS. She said her group approached the Board of Regents about green-building possibilities before the student union was approved.

“Specifically, we’re interested in water and energy conservation,” she said.

The new union will have waterless urinals and “fretted” windows, which are adorned with UNR logos and designed to reduce heating and air conditioning costs.

Despite rising construction costs, especially in steel and concrete, officials said they were able to remain on budget.

“All the subcontractors’ pricing is locked in at time of bid,” said Lou Primack, area director of Penta Building Group, which is building the new union. “That’s about 85 percent of the cost of the project.”

“It’s about a \$64 million project,” said Price. “That’s not just construction.” It includes design, bond fees, etc. Students have paid for 100 percent of the new union’s construction, in one way or another, he said.

Along with a \$95 fee every semester, “we’re also using some other student fee money and money from the bookstore and food services, which comes from students,” said Price.

Even when the new union is finished, construction on the Mathewson IGT (International Gaming Technology) Knowledge Center next door will continue until fall of 2008.

When the new Knowledge Center is complete, it will be one of the most advanced college libraries in the nation, said Dr. Steven Zink, vice president of information technology.

The 295,000 square-foot center will have high-tech “smart” classrooms, a wireless network and computers throughout the building, a media lab for multimedia projects, lots of paper-filled relics called books and magazines, viewing and listening stations for videos and CDs, an art gallery, the Nevada Writers Hall of Fame and the Center for Basque Studies, among other things.

One major feature of the new Knowledge Center will be a robotic retrieval system for books. Here's how it works: Books are stored in different bins according to size and weight. A student looks up the book and requests it to be retrieved by computer. The robotic system finds the book by code number and brings the bin down for the student to collect.

"They're these giant, sort of crane-like things," Zink said, jokingly comparing it to something from *Star Trek*.

A few other universities have robotic retrieval systems, but UNR will be the first to have a multi-story one. Perhaps its most impressive part is its cost efficiency.

"It saves probably 100,000 square feet" of floor space, said Zink. "We couldn't have afforded the building without it."

Budgeted at \$108 million, the Knowledge Center is much more expensive than the new union. It originally was budgeted at \$66 million, which was covered by one-third student fees, one-third state dollars and one-third private donations. Unlike the new union, the Knowledge Center student fee money was drawn from existing fees, not new ones.

"We get caught with the rapid increase of steel and concrete [prices]," Zink said.

The extra \$42 million, said Zink, came from "adjusting our spending based on refinancing bonds," as well as the state and private donors—not from students. He added that the extra costs will not put UNR at a deficit.

Despite the center's high cost, there hasn't been much hype about it yet on campus.

"I think the students have been concentrating on—if they've been concentrating at all—on the student union since it's coming first," said Zink. "I think they're going to be pleasantly surprised."