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New Center to Improve Life Aquatic

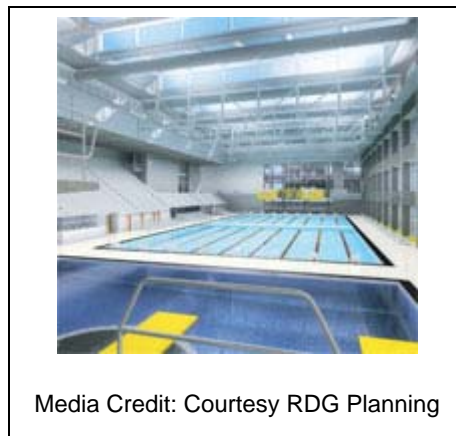
By Paul Kazmierczak

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When Iowa students leave the south entrance of the Main Library and stroll through Gibson Square during the fall of 2009, they will no longer be faced with an uninspiring complex of parking lots and mundane structures.

Instead, a shimmering chateau of glass and red brick will stand on the same ground the UI police and maintenance facilities once occupied.

The new \$69.7 million Campus Recreation and Wellness Center, which will supplant the Field House as the centerpiece of the school's recreation and aquatics programs, is in the final stages of preparation, with bidding for the construction contract slated for next September.



Media Credit: Courtesy RDG Planning

For a mandatory \$219 fee, students will have access to a bevy of athletics and leisure facilities, said Recreational Services Director Harry Ostrander. In addition to an Olympic-size competition pool and diving well, the center will contain a leisure pool based on a water-park concept. The leisure-pool plan includes a zero-depth entrance, water spouts, lap lanes, and a current channel similar to a lazy river.

For special events, a proposed portable water slide will attach to the top of the diving tower and wind its way into the diving well.

However, aquatics are only half the story. The facility will also include a track, three basketball gyms, a 55-foot rock-climbing wall, and a 20,000-square-foot fitness area. By comparison, the two rooms of the Fitness Loft in the Field House total around 6,000 square feet.

While the new center will have a tremendous effect on student life, it will also completely reshape the landscape for the Iowa swimming and diving programs. The Field House pool now used by the team was built in 1927 and survives on veritable life support. Although the water is constantly filtered, the pool hasn't been drained in years. With ancient plumbing tenuously maintaining the required pressure, athletics officials don't know if the pool would hold water if refilled.

The present facility also hampers the swimming program's competitive viability. With only eight collegiate-length lanes, the team is forced to stagger into separate groups during practice. Moreover, while the diving structure nearly scrapes the ceiling, it doesn't quite reach the 10

meters required for collegiate platform diving.

The new natatorium will boast an Olympic 50-meter pool that will be split with a moveable bulkhead into two 25-meter lengths for collegiate meets. Hawkeye swimmers will practice as a team, and divers will be able to take off from a legal-length platform.

Having 16 regulation-length lanes will allow the university to host events and invitationals, adding prestige to a program on the rise. The state of the art center will also serve as an incentive for potential recruits.

"A lot of recruiting is perception," head swimming coach Marc Long said.

With one of the nation's premier aquatic centers, the perception of Iowa's swimming program is bound to improve.

"It's overwhelming how outstanding this facility can be to help us," Long said.

Although nearing construction, the planned complex has followed a convoluted path. In fact, Ostrander said, the idea behind the center originated from focus groups commissioned eight years ago to study potential remodeling of the IMU.

The groups found, however, that students were more interested in a new recreation center. With strong student interest and an antiquated pool, the university consulted with Sasaki Associates Inc. to ascertain the feasibility of a new facility. The group looked at nine different sites on and around campus before settling on a location near Finkbine golf course. With proposals accepted and designs completed, the complex was all but built. In fact, Senior Associate Athletics Director Jane Meyer confirmed the hole for the foundation had already been dug where the field-hockey grounds currently sit.

"We filled it back in," Meyer deadpanned.

A state budget shortfall doomed the project. Between 2001 and 2002, former Iowa Gov. Tom Vilsack instituted a 4.3 percent cut in funding for all state agencies. In response, the university raised tuition rates 18.5 percent, following a 9.9 percent increase the year before.

The school was left with two choices - increase student fees even more or suspend construction on the new rec center. To help alleviate the budget crisis, the school halted construction.

The hiatus allowed school officials to rethink the original design. In 2004, the university commissioned a new study, guided by the planning firm of Brailsford and Dunlavey, to reassess the situation. The group settled on the southwest corner of Burlington and Madison Streets as the best location for the new facility.

The athletics department believes redesigning the facility will ultimately pay off.

"We're going to get a better facility and a better location for students," Meyer said.

As for the current pool, Ostrander said the school is looking at two possibilities. The athletics department has allocated only enough money to cover the pool and create a fitness area with equipment brought down from the loft. If the department could come up with more funds, the site might be converted into a venue for small events, such as gymnastics or women's volleyball.

The rest of the Field House will remain largely unchanged and continue to host various intramural events. The new center, meanwhile, will be primarily a drop-in center. Students will be able to come in throughout the day and access almost any part of the facility.