

Bangor Daily News

UM Starts Work on Rec Center

Groundbreaking held for \$25M facility expected to open in '07

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ERIC RUSSELL, OF THE NEWS STAFF

ORONO - The University of Maine broke ground Friday on a \$25 million student recreation center, which university leaders hope will be a beacon to students for years to come. The project was nearly four years in the making. "I feel very much connected to my colleagues in student affairs today because they have planned for a long time to bring this beacon on the hill here," Dean of Students Robert Dana told a crowd of about 200 who gathered under a white tent near where the facility will be built.

"This project says, 'Welcome students.' It says, 'Students are a number one priority here.' It says, 'We stand for students.'"

A large group of students, staff and faculty heard from several people who were instrumental in bringing the project to fruition, including newly named UM President Robert Kennedy.

"I've been the permanent president for two weeks: last Friday we dedicated two facilities; today we're dedicating this magnificent facility. What's next week? Let's keep this going," he joked, then added, "I have not been as passionate about something that was needed on this campus as I have been for the student recreation center."

The 86,000-square-foot facility, which is the most expensive single project in the school's history, is expected to open by the fall of 2007.

The \$25 million price tag will be paid for through a mandatory fee to all students, but no one will be assessed fees until the center is operational, said Associate Dean of Students Kenda Scheele. At Latti Fitness Center, students now have the option of paying \$35 per semester to use the facility, but the fee is not required of all students.

"No one is going to pay for this facility until they can walk through its doors," Scheele said.

The fee will be \$90 per semester for the new facility, but students Friday said the price is reasonable.

"I would pay more than that," student body President Kate O'Brien said. "If the facilities here aren't to their liking, students are going to go elsewhere. This way we can keep students here on campus."

The process for a new recreation center started in 2002 with a feasibility study. The university decided on a location - behind Stewart Commons on the north side of campus - last summer.

Scheele said the location should cater to students since 65 percent of students live on the north side. Dana said Scheele, the university's former campus recreation director, was the driving force behind the project.

"I said, 'Kenda, I will join with you, I will partner with you, I will do the heavy lifting, and she said, 'Step aside, young man, I'll take care of this,'" Dana said, spurring laughter from the audience. "And she has."

Brailsford and Dunlavey, the Washington, D.C.-based planners of the project, have been on board since the beginning.

"We've really heard this was a desire, not only for current students but to attract students for many generations to come," Vice President Brad Noyes said.

Cannon Design of Boston is the project's designer, and Pizzagalli Construction of South Portland will manage the construction, which is scheduled to take roughly two years.

Dana said of all the people involved with the recreation center, the students are the most important.

"This is a hugely expensive, complicated enterprise and they understood that there were many demands for money elsewhere," Dana said. "But they stood side by side with us and said 'proceed' and that's a voice of great confidence for a student-centered university."

The current fitness center, located in the university field house, will be turned over to the athletic department. That space will become the new home of the weight room for the University of Maine's 19 varsity sports, athletic department spokesman Brent Williamson said.

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