

# Bangor Daily News

## Fit at UMaine

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Except for that pesky jobless economic recovery looming beyond graduation, campus life for college students looks especially splendid these days. Lavish new student centers with more amenities in one building than many small Maine towns contain, food that appears a notch or two above edible, suites that have replaced two-to-a-room dorms combine to nearly define cushy. But best of all are the new fitness centers, those sleek, aerobically attractive replacements for the stodgy rec halls of generations past.

The University of Maine System board of trustees late last month approved a longtime plan at UMaine to spend \$25 million on a new fitness center. It sounds as if it will be an impressive place - 85,000 square feet of new building surrounding a pool, jogging track, racquetball courts, weight rooms, etc., at a spot yet to be determined on the Orono campus. Current and past - and they go way into the past - users of the university's facilities at Memorial Gym know that a new field house has been badly need for years.

So good for UMaine for recognizing that a new fitness center is an important draw for potential students, and a necessary resource for current students, faculty and staff. It will improve the quality of nonclassroom hours and give the university's sports teams more room at Memorial Gym (which, certainly, will need some refurbishing as well).

But an extensive fitness center can be a difficult sell in a state that just chopped \$1 billion from its budget and is watching its manufacturing jobs evaporate. At some point university system officials will appear before the Legislature, probably to ask for more money, and will reassure lawmakers that they are doing everything they can to keep costs down and make higher education more affordable for students. At that point some lawmaker could well ask about why UMaine chose to tack on \$180 a year to student fees to help pay for the fitness center when those students carry among the highest tuition burdens in the nation. Unlike an increased parking fee, which is targeted to users and probably needed, this student fee is charged whether students use the center or not and represents a significant jump in the total fees students are required to pay each year.

Brailsford & Dunlavey, facility planners used by UMaine, show that most other universities it has surveyed charged students less (an average of \$150 a year) for considerably larger centers. Lots of variables go into determining costs for a project, but given the financial burden already on students here and the fact that what the university raises in private donations is among the lowest amount for flagship state universities, more thought should have gone into finding private sources of funding.

The university says raising private funds would take too long and have to wait behind another \$20 million worth of active projects. Fair enough, and even better, the university has in the last couple of years better organized and strengthened its fund-raising program with encouraging results. But a more aggressive venture in finding names to put on the various facilities of the center would make it a much-needed and unmitigated success.