

Bangor Daily News

\$25M Fitness Center Approved for UM

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By Ruth-Ellen Cohen

The University of Maine System board of trustees Monday approved a \$25 million sport and fitness center to be built at the Orono campus and funded by a combination of student and user fees.

The 85,000-square-foot facility will include an indoor swimming pool, two racquetball courts, a jogging track, weight-training and fitness machines, a whirlpool and sauna, two multipurpose rooms, a juice bar and locker rooms.

Student fees at the University of Maine will increase by \$90 per semester to fund the project. But tuition and fees at the flagship campus still will remain the lowest among the New England land grant universities, officials said during the meeting which was held at UM's Darling Marine Center in Walpole.

Construction will begin next spring and the facility is anticipated to open in the fall of 2006. Several sites across campus are being considered and will be chosen based on accessibility and "curb appeal," UM President Peter Hoff said.

The state-of-the-art facility will help recruit and retain students, promote health and wellness, and provide additional campus activities as well as a social venue, according to officials.

"It adds an element to campus life that we just don't have," said Executive Vice President and Provost Robert Kennedy.

Currently, university athletes as well as students involved in fitness and recreational activities share the Latti Center on campus.

The idea for a new recreation center has been bandied about for as long as 10 years, according to Hoff, who said he "took a position" that the project wouldn't move forward until students said they wanted it to.

During the past few years, "students really stepped up and said they were interested in doing it and paying for it. It's that important to them," said UMS trustee and student body president Matt Rodrigue.

More than 2,900 students surveyed said they were frustrated with the quality and accessibility of the existing facilities, said Brad Noyes of Brailsford & Dunlavey, the Washington, D.C., consulting firm hired to help with the project.

Among students polled, 81 percent said new recreation facilities should be a "medium to very high" UM priority, Noyes said during a presentation.

Nationally, studies show that parents agree that a health and fitness center "buys more university and a better quality of life," he said.

Students won't begin paying the additional fee until the new facility is open. The \$35 fee currently associated with the Latti Center will be discontinued at that time.

The facility will be available to faculty and staff and, on a limited basis, the community.

Also at the meeting, trustees approved tentative two-year contracts for full-and part-time faculty members that include salary increases.

While health insurance premiums will rise, the percentage paid by faculty will remain the same.

If the contracts are approved by members of the Associated Faculties of the University of Maine System and of the Maine Part-Time Faculty Association, collective bargaining agreements for the system's six employee units will have been completed through June 30, 2005.

The contract for the faculty covers 1,275 members and expired last June, while the contract for part-time faculty covers 500 to 700 members per semester and expired at the end of August.

The board also:

- . Accepted updated diversity plans from each campus to help students become more aware of different cultures and perspectives.

- . Approved a doctoral program in psychology at the University of Southern Maine to address the state's growing need for school psychologists.