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Gimbel Gym to Double in Size

By Karlene Hanko
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Construction is set to begin next summer on the \$20 million project.

The long-awaited \$20 million overhaul of the newly named Pottruck Health and Fitness Center will nearly double the size of the existing Gimbel Gymnasium, according to architectural designs released yesterday.

The New York City-based firm Richard Dattner Architect, P.C., was selected to design plans that would expand and renovate Gimbel, providing the first large-scale addition to on-campus recreational space in recent memory.

The firm's preliminary report suggests the creation of a three-story structure in the space currently occupied by the Katz Fitness Center and increasing the square footage for free weights, cardiovascular equipment and recreational programming from 80,000 to 150,000 square feet, Vice President for Facilities Omar Blaik said.

Officials hope to begin construction next summer on the project -- funded primarily by a \$10 million donation from 1970 College graduate and University Trustee David Pottruck -- and are aiming for completion during spring 2002.

During construction, officials plan to keep all existing components of Gimbel open, although the basketball courts and pool will close temporarily during renovations. The Katz Fitness Center will move temporarily to the second floor of the building during construction.

The first phase of the project will likely include the demolition of the one-story structure currently occupied by the Katz Center and the construction of a three-story annex connected to the existing structure by an atrium, Blaik said.

In the second phase, the pool, basketball courts and shower and bathroom facilities will be renovated, eventually bringing new lighting and refinished walls and ceilings to the completed project.

"There will be definite improvements in the existing space," Blaik said.

The main entrance on Walnut Street will remain open during construction, he added.

Although the completed facility will bear Pottruck's name, the Katz Fitness Center, the Gimbel Gymnasium and Sheerr Pool will remain within the larger structure and retain their names.

Project architect Federico Del Priore said the atrium, which will connect the old and new buildings, will open up both buildings to the street while creating a visually pleasing experience.

"You will be able to see through the main space in the north-south direction," Del Priore said.

The vendors that occupy the fresh air food plaza next to Gimbel will be temporarily relocated during construction, although officials have not yet found a spot for them, Blaik said.

"We are currently looking into several options but it is very feasible for them to come back after the construction is done," Blaik said.

The firm was selected earlier this month from an initial pool of five architects for its "terrific experience in health and fitness centers in many urban cities and on campuses," Blaik said.

Del Priore said his company welcomed the Pottruck project as a chance "to expand our firm's range of project types and work on sports facilities" as well as "the opportunity to work for a prestigious institution like Penn."

The firm's project history already includes a long list of sports and fitness centers, gymnasiums, recreational facilities, swimming pools and urban parks.

University officials first attempted to address the need for better exercise facilities in 1996 when they hired the consulting firm of Brailsford & Dunlavey to create a list of recommendations for the future development of athletic and recreational facilities on campus.

As a result of the recommendations -- which called for 225,000 additional square feet of indoor recreational space -- Gimbel underwent \$1.2 million in renovations in 1998 for the construction of the ground-floor Katz Fitness Center.