

The Providence Journal

Sports Center Plans Beginning to Make Headway at URI

**Officials Have Tentatively Projected
the Groundbreaking for the Convocation Center in March 2000**

December 22, 1998

By Paul Kenyon, Journal Sports Writer

University of Rhode Island basketball fans are about to receive the holiday present they have been seeking for years - a new, on-campus building for their team.

Plans for a convocation center, which have been quietly moving forward over the past several months, are now being unveiled by school officials. Tentative plans call for a facility to be built adjacent to the current athletic buildings, seat 7,500-8,000 and serve the entire school, not just the basketball programs.

"There is a lot of planning going on behind the scenes," Linda Acciaro, director of the department of communications, said yesterday. "A steering committee has been set up. Some private fundraising efforts are going on. We've hired a fundraiser who will begin work Jan. 4." The school also is in the process of hiring a management firm to plan and develop the project.

In other words, the long-sought, much-delayed project is about to become a reality.

The current schedule calls for groundbreaking in March 2000 and the first event to be held in November 2001. However, even organizers concede that might be a bit ambitious. A more likely time frame, Acciaro said, might be to push it back one year. Efforts will be made, though, to move as quickly as possible.

Studies have estimated cost at \$ 43.6 million.

The project, which has received the full support of Governor Almond, URI's No. 1 basketball booster, is dependent on the school raising \$ 15 million through private donations. School officials already have started sounding out potential donors and have come away encouraged. The state has pledged to match all money raised, to \$ 15 million, dollar for dollar.

As planned, the project also will include a new ice rink. That phase, expected to cost about \$ 7.4 million, will include a two-sheet ice facility. It could be done separately from the convocation center, possibly even on an earlier time schedule. The goal is to make that building self-supporting through rental of ice time. There are no plans as yet, however, to elevate hockey, currently a club sport at URI, to varsity status.

Acciaro has been designated as the official spokesperson for the project, in part, to reflect that it is not merely an athletic department proposal to replace 45-year-old Keaney Gym but a project to benefit the entire school.

"The convocation center will provide a venue for activities ranging from academic events, such as convocation and commencement, to athletic events, to cultural and entertainment events," Acciaro said. "The center will provide a site to serve an audience more in keeping with the size and scale of the university, with a student population alone of more than 13,000."

URI currently does not have a facility large enough to host campus-wide events. Last year, when it rained on graduation day, the ceremonies had to be broken up and held at several different buildings.

In addition to being able to serve such purposes, the new facility will have the capacity and technology needed for large conferences, business meetings and civic functions to serve the community.

"This center will afford the university the opportunity to present an expanded list of events to enrich the lives of its students and all Rhode Islanders," Acciaro said.

The school last week announced the hiring of Robert Turcotte, a 1985 Boston College graduate who had been director of athletic development at Northeastern, to head the fundraising program. It also plans to hire an architectural firm next month.

Over the past four months, a Washington, D.C., firm, Brailsford & Dunlavey, put together a market, architectural and financial feasibility study which is being used to guide the committee members.

A meeting was held last week with Gov. Almond and Tom Ryan, a URI alumnus and CEO of the CVS Corporation, taking active roles in the project.

One key decision which already has been made, Acciaro said, is that rather than hiring full-time staff to oversee the project, or have the staff in the school's Office of Capital Projects oversee the work, the school will hire a program management firm. The Capital Projects office already has a full slate because of other renovation and construction programs.

The university also has started meeting with representatives of the town of South Kingstown and the state Department of Transportation to review strategies for traffic flow. Additionally, it has put together a group of volunteers who have agreed to help with fundraising.

In October, the Student Senate put out a referendum, asking if students were in favor of a \$ 50 per semester assessment to help pay for the convocation center. It passed with 72 percent support.

The current plan is to locate the new building in the athletic area, west of the current Mackal Forum-Keaney Gym-Tootell Fieldhouse complex. That could change, though. Plans calls for the companies hired to do the managerial work and architectural work to make changes if they feel they are warranted.