Solid foundation: Library digs deep to build ‘a place for learning’

BY TIM TERNAN

It was a muddy hole in the ground for months. Now, the long-armed machines ripped loose tons and tons of earth, down to bedrock, and when it rained, a brown stream flowed into University Avenue.

Then they hammered at the rock—for days. Those of us in White and Clark halls could feel vibrations as hardened steel fought limestone. All told, 22,000 cubic yards of dirt were hauled away. The hammering continued, pounding a deeper foundation, deeper, as if durability, permanence and stability in this building were not just a task, not just another construction project, but a duty—the building of a monument to knowledge, information and the preservation of culture.

Yet no ordinary monument. This library is taking shape as librarians worldwide are grappling with the notion of digital information and how it intersects with traditional, paper-based library resources. This library must blend both worlds, said Library Dean Frances O’Brien. “It’s a symbol of a new approach to research, information access and education,” she said. “This building is a significant part of how we are going to get to a new world.”

Now, the concrete foundation has enclosed the muddy void (about 1,000 cubic yards of foundation concrete have been poured) and an outline of WVU’s millennium library is easy to see. By the end of this month the foundation and footing work will be complete; steel will go up (860 tons of it) and by November floors and an outside shell will be visible.

The facility will be opened by November 2001. Then renovations begin on the old building, which was first occupied on Sept. 1, 1951 (for a fascinating history of WVU’s libraries, visit www.libraries.wvu.edu/history).

The groundbreaking took place on the state’s birthday in June of 1999, and construction began later that summer. It was the first groundbreaking under the University’s Master Plan.

The five-story, 124,000-square-foot complex, including the Wise renovations by September 2001.

Plan, is scheduled to be completed in October 2001, says Terri Castor, project manager with Physical Plant.

“Things are moving well,” Castor says. “The foundation work is finishing up, and steel erection will start soon. The construction manager is also working on the installation of site utilities to the building.”

The facility is being built to better accommodate the teaching and research needs of the two largest departments in the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences. The Department of Biology has 688 undergraduate students, 25 graduate students, 23 faculty and 14 staff. There are 600 undergraduate students, 80 graduate students, 22 faculty, three research associates and six staff in psychology.

The building’s floor will house a herbarium, building support spaces and other facilities. The next level will have general purpose classrooms, including a 250-seat auditorium, a 125-seat auditorium and two 60-seat instructional rooms. The psychology department will occupy the next two floors, and the biology department will have the upper three floors and a six-unit greenhouse atop the building.

Payette Associates of Boston is the architect for the facility. Dick Corp. of Pittsburgh is the construction manager.

Psychology today

Michael Perone, chairman of psychology, says the new building will be an improvement over the department’s quarters in Ogletree Hall. Ogletree was built in 1918 for agricultural sciences and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

“There will be more space than psychology currently has, and the space will be of a higher quality,” Dr. Perone says. “What we have here is an old sciences facility that has been arranged in a makeshift fashion for psychology over the years.”

The extra space will accommodate expanded teaching and research labs and an additional computer lab, he says. In Ogletree, faculty and students do behavioral research in small, poorly ventilated rooms. There are about 90 computer stations in undergraduates and graduate instructional labs.

The Quin Curtis Center, which provides low-cost, high-quality psychological services to the community, will also expand in the new building. Perone says. The new space will provide an administrative wing, five therapy rooms and three observation rooms.

Another important feature of the new facility is that it will be handicapped-accessible. In Ogletree, people with disabilities must enter the building through a basement entrance and use a 1917 freight elevator to go from one floor to the next. The American Psychological Association, which accredits the department’s graduate program, has made continued accreditation contingent on improved access for the handicapped.

Biological change

James McGraw, interim chairman of biology, says the additional space and modern labs and equipment in the new building will enable biology faculty and students to conduct research they cannot do in Brooks Hall.

“Our research labs were designed in the 1950s for a science that was extremely different from what we have now,” Dr. McGraw says. “In the area of molecular biology, for instance, there’s been a revolution in techniques that requires all kinds of new instrumentation.”

Another benefit of the new facility will be a greenhouse in the right location for absorbing sunlight. Attached to the greenhouse will be an ecotron, a place where researchers can control environmental factors.

“Right now, we have a small greenhouse placed in exactly the wrong place in the building, and we have just a few growth chambers in which to do our research,” McGraw says. “In the new facility, the greenhouse will be in the right place for exposure to sunlight. In the ecotron, we will be able to do such experiments as controlling temperatures to see how different plants and animals respond to global warming.”

Faculty will also be able to complement their lectures with the latest multimedia technologies.

Of mutual benefit

Perone and McGraw say the Life Sciences Building will have an impact on both majors combined.

“Stronger ties with biology will support students seeking double majors in biology and psychology, stimulate exciting new interdisciplinary research and allow us to forge new linkages with the Health Sciences Center,” Perone says.