Best Yet to Come in Commons

By Andrea Kniss
Staff Writer

Since the completion of the University Commons “Phase I” in August 2000, EMU has enjoyed three new athletic courts, a fitness center, campus bookstore, snack shop, game room, lounge areas and multiple office suites.

Still, some would say the best is yet to come. Plans are to renovate and transform the current Student Center into a hub for the Theater, Art and Communication departments. This past summer, the University Commons Phase II Planning Committee, chaired by Amy Springer, held several meetings with consultants to commence design.

The Troyer Group, Inc. is the architect, Schuler & Shook, Inc. is the theater consultant, and Jacob L. Friesen & Associates, LLC is acoustical consultant, for the new Phase of construction.

The forthcoming renovations are an "incredibly exciting prospect," said Theater Department Co-chair Paul Hildebrand. Co-chair Barbra Graber anticipates a "lively educational space as well as a very beautiful performing space" for the EMU community.

Nevertheless, the project is "not a small chunk of change," said Hildebrand.

Vice President for Finance Ronald Piper said that when the University Commons project was launched, the university hoped to raise enough to construct both phases without pause in between. Since the $13 million needed for Phase I alone was the largest campaign in EMU history, however, promoters all but "tapped out [their] donors" and "weren’t able to keep it going." The second phase calls for another $10 million.

A $490,000 government grant secured by president Joseph Lapp has covered design costs and the completion of an office suite for the aforementioned departments. Over the summer, following the closing of the decrepit Guild theater above Northlawn, a new studio theater dubbed the Black Box opened in the Student Center base-

ment.

While design is still in progress, all anticipated components of Phase II are tentative. At this point, a 350-405 seat, fully equipped theater is slated to replace the old gymnasium. Additional Phase II projections include a rehearsal studio, theater storage space, classrooms and offices, an audio-visual studio and a student art gallery.

Students may remember the old gym being used in the past for intramural sports such as indoor soccer and floor hockey. This past summer, however, the Theater department took over the space.

Timothy Guntz, Assistant Director of Student Programs and Orientation and rec sports director, said this change "gives [rec sports] some opportunities to move into places where [they] might normally not have moved." Soccer games will be held in the Commons gym while basketball will take place on the outdoor basketball courts. On the new playing surface, "[floor hockey] is probably a little closer to ice hockey" than last year, said Guntz.

A student-run coffee shop in the basement of the Student Center is expected to be opened by the end of this semester. The shop will be funded by the Lilly Grant and operated by the Student Government Association. Graber hopes it will be an ideal location for poetry readings, stand-up comedy and other small-scale performances.

Upon the inauguration of the new theater, Lehman Auditorium will become a "live theater" space. In the meantime, the EMU community will continue to utilize Phase I resources while benefiting from "phase one of Phase II." The studio theater, new classrooms and offices and the forthcoming coffee shop. Hildebrand welcomes student interest in, and inquiries about the ongoing progress.

The $300,000 in annual maintenance costs for the Commons, which includes custodial staffing and utilities, comprises about one percent of the university’s operational expenses and necessary factors into student tuition. Nonetheless, Piper views the building less as a financial burden than as a "tremendous blessing...to the university." In a message to the public posted on the EMU website, President Lapp says "the University Commons is the most far-reaching capital project in the history of EMU. It is also the most financially demanding. Yet I am confident that the university's friends will rise to the challenge, as they have time and again over the school's 80-year history."

Construction materials are commonplace in "Phase II" of the commons. Carpet adhesive (above) was used this week to add the finishing touches to the floor in the new office space.

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stressed that the visit was merely part of procedures. He said that EMU had been given a number of months to address the issues, which were identified as inadequate library staffing, and that Jackson and Davison had come to make a final assessment of the university’s dealing with the issues before preparing a recommendation for the SACs Commission.

"We had a very satisfactory visit," [Jackson and Davison] told me their report will say that we met the criterion that was in question--staffing in the library," said Academic provost Brubaker. "Now [SACs] will remove our probation and our accreditation will be good for the full eight years," she continued.

In 2008 EMU will be up for another normally scheduled round of reaccreditation processes.

"I think we have addressed what we used primarily as a concert hall. But until adequate funds are raised, predicting a timeline for Phase II, construction is difficult. Rough estimates set five years as the target time for its completion.

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