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WKU Commons project touted as way to blend social, study spaces

By AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com Mar 2, 2019

A rendering of the WKU Commons project.

Photo courtesy of WKU

A \$35 million project aims to transform Western Kentucky University's Helm Library into the WKU Commons, a space that will blend social and study spaces.

"I'm pleased that we've pushed the envelope," WKU President Timothy Caboni said Friday at a Board of Regents meeting where architects shared schematic designs for the project. WKU has retained architects from Lockett & Farley of Louisville and Gensler of Chicago.

"We've taken advantage of an opportunity and created a space for all of our students, including commuter students, who will have a place to stay and study and engage at the top of The Hill," he told the board.

After originally opening in 1931 and being named for librarian Margie Helm in 1964, the library will close at the end of the semester so work can begin to convert the building into a dining and study space. According to a news release, the building was once used as a gymnasium, referred to as the Big Red Barn. The basketball court jump circle will be preserved in its original location.

The WKU Commons is expected to open in spring 2021.

WKU is working with its dining services provider Aramark on the project.

A 20-year dining services contract with Aramark signed by then-president Gary Ransdell will help finance the project, but the cost will be passed on to students in the form of higher dining fees.

During the regents meeting Friday, campus leaders said the project was needed to help keep WKU competitive.

University Libraries Dean Susann deVries said she presented the project to library faculty before it was revealed publicly. She said the project was well-received.

A committee representing faculty, staff and students has been working with the architects to develop designs for the project, according to the news release. That included a “design safari” to Chicago to visit 16 similar venues, campus meetings with students, faculty and staff and two online surveys for student input, according to the release.

“Faculty on the steering committee expressed a real need for a place to meet up with fellow colleagues, with students, in a different environment without having to leave the campus,” deVries told the board Friday.

Board of Regents Chairman Phillip Bale agreed, adding that he thinks students are going to expect brick and mortar universities to have such collaborative spaces.



“Seems like this fits very nicely,” he said.

During their presentation to the board, architects described the concept for their designs to strike a balance between preserving some of the building’s features while making it more accessible and like an “open book.”

The west facade of the current building, for example, is replaced with a glass wall that makes the interior of the building visible from outside. A large stairway between the first and second floors features seating areas that branch out from the stairway. A large opening on the third floor also makes parts of the second and first floors visible.

The first floor will be devoted to food service mixed with seating and group space, and architects compared it to a corporate cafeteria setting. The second floor features a coffee bar and has a large opening to the third floor, which is for academic space.

deVries said the project has broad support from library staff.

“We can’t be more pleased with how this played out,” she said.

Renderings are available to view online at www.wku.edu/commons/renderings.php.



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