



UNM-Taos gets OK for downtown campus project

By Cody Hooks

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In the coming months, two buildings at the corner of Camino de la Placita and Civic Plaza Drive in Taos will become a full-on construction site as the University of New Mexico-Taos moves ahead with renovations to create a Health Careers Training Center.

The renovations have been in the works for a year and a half, but the state Board of Finance gave UNM-Taos final approval Tuesday (April 21).

Renovations will center on R'o Grande and Bataan Halls, creating a unified, state-of-the-art facility to house UNM-Taos' various medical programs, including nursing, EMT, massage therapy and holistic sciences.

In November, voters approved a general obligation bond to fund higher education. As a direct result, \$4 million will become available July 1 to push ahead, according to Dr. Kate O'Neill, director of UNM-Taos.

Currently, the health science programs operate in rented space at Holy Cross Hospital and disparate facilities around Taos.

O'Neill said that the new training center will match the high caliber of students and faculty in the health programs. To date, 100 percent of the nursing students from UNM-Taos have passed their certification exams, a feat that is essentially unheard of, O'Neill said.

The initial thrust of the renovations will be structural improvements and an exterior facelift to both buildings, and a full-scale repurposing of R'o Grande Hall.

The training center will feature a traditional classroom and dedicated EMT and massage training spaces. Nursing students will also have access to a "simulation space" with life-sized dummies, which can be programmed to simulate fluctuating temperatures, cardiac arrest and other ailments.

The health science programs represent "a whole pipeline of careers," O'Neill said. Through various grants and initiatives, high-school students can begin their nursing certification through dual-credit courses even before they've graduated, while folks getting a GED can streamline their education right into the medial sciences. At the same time, the training center will emphasize health care prevention as much as treatment.

O'Neill noted the renovations are a work in progress and that Bataan Hall, which will be used for workforce training, will be a flexible space, able to adapt to the university's needs as officials continue researching how best to optimize each space for maximum usability.

The renovations, O'Neill said, still have to be vetted as the university moves forward with the final stages of planning and putting the project out to bid.

But by this coming summer, Taose-os can expect to see a roped-off, hard hat-only construction zone.

The renovations are expected to create 40-60 construction jobs over a period of 12-18 months.