

Kibbie Dome update plan is finalized

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By Joel Mills of the Tribune

Overhaul planning began more than three years ago; final cost of improvements will be \$23 million



As work on the west wall of the Kibbie Dome nears completion, University of Idaho officials are fina... Tribune/Kyle Mills

MOSCOW - It's not quite the dome of their dreams.

But after years of struggle, University of Idaho officials have finally locked in the last pieces of their plan to update the aging Kibbie Dome.

"It has been (a project) that made us be as creative as we possibly could, within the constraints of what you could properly do with money at a public institution," said Lloyd Mues, the UI's vice president of finance.

Planning for a complete overhaul of the 34-year-old multi-purpose facility started more than three years ago. The cost of the original wish list was \$52 million, and included safety improvements and extensive luxury additions, like box seats and a 9,000-square-foot terrace to house a "Vandal Hospitality Club."

Economic realities forced the university to scale back that ambitious vision. But tackling safety issues like fire suppression and emergency exits was not a choice, Mues said.

"We had to take action," he said. "And so we did. But right when we started, you had the financial collapse."

So Mues and other financial officers at the university and the State Board of Education pieced together a phased plan that mixed unconventional tools like a short-term construction loan with more traditional debt financing.

Work on the pressing life-safety problems started last year with the replacement of the flammable plywood of the dome's west wall with translucent panels, installation of sprinkler systems and the addition of field level exits. That \$10 million project is nearing completion.

A \$2 million appropriation from the State Permanent Building Fund helped make the sprinkler system more comprehensive.

And last week, the state board approved another \$11 million in bonding to replace the east wall and make other safety-related improvements.

Financing for that project had been in doubt. But Mues said in December it became apparent low interest rates combined with the UI's solid bond rating made it the right time to jump.

"Very honestly, right now is a fantastic time to borrow money, if you can do it," he said.

University officials traveled to San Francisco for meetings with the credit agencies Standard & Poor's and Moodys to lay out their plan.

"They saw we are increasing enrollment, and raising revenue," Mues said. "They maintained our credit rating, even with the additional debt."

The university also took the opportunity to refinance some old bonds to save about \$200,000 in interest payments, he said. And part of the east wall project will be financed with Build America bonds that were part of the stimulus act. That means the federal government will pay 35 percent of the interest on those bonds.

The overall bonding package approved by the board last week totaled \$93 million.

The final cost of all the Kibbie Dome improvements will be \$23 million.

That doesn't include about \$6 million in enhanced amenities inside the dome paid for with donated funds. Those improvements include a new press box, club-level seating and suite-style seating boxes.

The project and the east end wall replacement will take place between the coming two football seasons, said UI construction manager Butch Fullerton.

The area around the west wall was wide open, making it a relatively easy project. But Fullerton said the presence of the Vandal Athletic Center on the dome's east end will make replacing its wall vastly more complicated.

"A portion of it can remain occupied, but some of it cannot," he said of the center.

Displaced employees will be moved to other quarters on campus for safety reasons, Fullerton said.

The center also limits the reach of cranes necessary to complete the project. So two anchored tower cranes will be needed, where the west end project needed only one.

The east end wall is also full of fire suppression equipment, electronics and other infrastructure that will all have to be dealt with during construction, he said.

But the nine-month time line for the project is perhaps the biggest challenge, Fullerton said. To get the job done in that time, he hopes to get a jump-start on some things, like cutting access holes and revising sprinkler systems.

"It's really going to be tough, and we hope to identify a number of things we can accomplish prior to tearing things apart."

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