Introduction

In the fall of 2009, Montana State University Billings contracted A&E Architects to conduct an Athletics and Auxiliaries Master Plan. The focus of this Plan is to determine the demand and financial feasibility for improvements to athletics, housing, the Student Union Building ("SUB"), food service, health services, and child care. The project team headed by A&E Architects also included Brailsford & Dunlavey and Envision Strategies to bring their specific experience to the Plan.

Current Situation

Montana State University Billings currently has three campuses in the Billings area: the main campus located along the rim rocks, a downtown campus, and a College of Technology in West Billings. MSUB was originally chartered as Eastern Montana College and brought into the Montana State University system in 1994. Also in 1994, the College of Technology started under MSUB. MSUB enrolled 4,972 students for the fall of 2009. The main campus enrolled 3,635 students, and 1,337 at the COT. Overall campus headcount is projected to increase slightly in the near future with potential growth areas identified as international students and COT students.

MSUB has successfully built and marketed a niche as the region’s low-cost provider of higher education. While this has been an important strategy for recruitment, this focus has not adequately allowed certain services and amenities to keep pace with other campuses. Further exacerbating the problem is the fact that the relatively low student population is spread across three campuses each with their own physical needs and inherent redundancies a high percentage of non-resident and non-traditional students.

Recent improvements to athletic and auxiliary spaces have been minimal resulting in facility crowding, overuse, and/or deferred maintenance issues. The campus residence halls provide
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limited housing options for students and require modernization. Facilities such as the PE Building are perceived to be remote to the flow of the campus and, because of overcrowding, have difficulty attracting large numbers of students for recreational use around student-athlete practice and training sessions. The Student Union Building, while reasonably-well utilized by resident students living in the residence halls above, is underutilized by the majority population of non-resident students due to its location, lack of visibility, and perceived lack of destination value for the non-residential students. The existing food service outlets in the SUB serve the resident students but are underutilized in general because a high percentage of non-resident students either eat at home, off-campus, or bring their lunch. The LA Express, a small limited menu operation in the LA Building, has proven to be very successful.

Additionally, no consensus existed across the University for a combined vision for athletics and auxiliaries and how these entities relate to the academic mission of MSUB.

Work Plan

The Project Team’s approach required an active working relationship with University staff to develop an understanding of the institution’s mission, relevant stakeholders, customer groups, and strategic project objectives which best serve that mission. The work plan included:

- a strategic visioning session was conducted to assess the strengths of existing facilities and how athletics and auxiliaries support the overall campus mission;
- a facility assessment of athletic and auxiliary spaces was conducted to understand the quality, quantity, and condition of space available at MSUB;
- a series of focus groups were conducted with students, faculty, and staff to understand the qualitative drivers for the Master Plan;
- a competitive context analysis was completed to understand MSUB’s market position against other institutions;
- a student survey was administered to determine preferences, interests, spending habits, and priorities of the campus student body;
- a demand analysis was developed to quantify needed space for the auxiliaries;
- a series of program options were developed to determine the relative project costs and impact on athletic and auxiliary operations;
- a financial analysis was completed to understand the operating parameters of the proposed projects; and
- a Master Plan concept was developed based on the feasible projects developed in this study.

Findings and Recommendations

Based on the analysis of data collected throughout the study, as well as the difficulty current facilities face in meeting the needs of contemporary students and services, it is clear that
significant improvements in athletic and auxiliary facilities will be required to meet the University’s vision and student demand. This is further complicated by the three-campus reality, the varying level of infrastructure at each campus, the significant distances between campuses, and the significantly different student profile between these campuses. These facilities should be viewed as accessible to all students, providing the University with opportunities for leadership development, professional development, and quality of life improvements which support the academic success of students. To accomplish these objectives, internal and external enhancements must be utilized to leverage existing auxiliary infrastructure and future capital investments.

Several primary needs rose to the top during the planning process and were identified as priority projects across the athletic and auxiliary spectrum. The study develops these projects in further detail and contains financial analyses of each project as an individual cost center. These include (1) the renovation and expansion of housing facilities on the main campus, (2) the partial renovation and expansion of the PE Building, and (3) the partial renovation and reconfiguration of the Student Union Building. (It should be noted that the recent renovations to the academic support facilities at the COT Technology Building were found to meet many of the most pressing needs for students at the COT campus.)

Other secondary needs were identified and quantified but determined to lack the broad-based support and/or the financial mechanisms to make them viable at this time. Those needs included (1) the expansion of the LA Express, (2) the relocation and expansion of the Student Health Center, (3) the expansion and/or relocation of the Child Care Facility, (4) the creation of a new or expanded facility for Native American students, (5) the development of on-campus housing at the COT, and (6) the development of athletic/recreational facilities at the COT.

Master Plan

The Master Plan for the main campus establishes preliminary locations for the primary needs listed below – improved and expanded housing facilities, expanded athletics and recreation facilities, and the reconfigured and expanded Student Union Building. The Plan addresses the expansion of the popular LA Express to a new location in the LA Building. It designates the west portion of the campus (between Normal and Virginia) as the future location for lower density campus housing to be built around other campus facilities such as the Chancellor’s residence, Child Care, the Foundation, and the KEMC studios. It reinforces earlier concepts raised by the 2000 Master Plan for Academic Facilities to (1) continue to remove vehicular parking from the core of the campus to new structured parking at the northwest edge of campus, and (2) reinforce the east/west pedestrian experience by removing the ASC Building and the tennis bubble and realigning sidewalks in this area to encourage pedestrian flow to the PE Building, on the main campus along with a preliminary master plan for growth at the College of Technology.
The Master Plan drawing package includes Site Plans of the main and COT campuses along with floor plans of various buildings and optional layouts. These plans generally illustrate the scale of spaces and functional relationships for planning purposes. However, it is understood that future projects will pursue the full programming/planning/design process.

Housing

The existing residence halls have a design capacity of 784 beds of double-occupancy traditional style rooms. Currently, the capacity of the residence halls have been reduced to provide single-occupancy rooms as an option for students to choose and MSUB housed 447 students in Fall 2009. The campus also has 10 family apartment units. Demand for single student and family housing surpassed the supply at MSUB and totaled 980 beds over seven different unit types. Demand exists for a variety of unit types which would provide more desirable housing for upper-class students seeking to remain in campus housing. Both Rimrock and Petro Halls require renovation to address deferred maintenance as improve the appearance and finishes of the facilities.

The Project Team developed a phasing plan that will provide for new campus housing and renovations to the existing residence halls. The first phase in the housing improvement plan is to renovate Rimrock Hall over the course of two summers (2013 and 2014). While this renovation will not increase the number of beds available, needed improvements to the residence hall infrastructure and aesthetic appearance will be made. The budget for the renovation is $4.1 million. The second phase of the improvement plan is to build a new housing facility of approximately 180 beds in junior suite and suite style configurations. These units would not have kitchens and would require students to purchase meal plans. The projected budget for the facility is $21 million and could be available to housing students as early as Fall 2014. The third phase of the improvement plan is a renovation to Petro Hall, similar to the Rimrock Hall renovation. The renovations would occur over two summers (2015 and 2016) and is budgeted at $7.2 million. Separate housing was considered at the COT campus to meet the demand there; however, the lack of available land at the COT required that demand to be met with housing on the main campus.

Housing rates are projected to increase annually in order to support the operations and debt service for renovations and new construction. The proposed projects will significantly increase the housing debt and will require initial modest increases plus a one-time increase of 50% in year 7, an increase of 15% in year 8, and an annual increase of 3% thereafter.

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While demand is present for apartment units on campus, financial modeling indicated that significant additional housing rate increases would be required to support their construction in the
near future. Apartments are more feasible for construction around year 15 of the financial model. In order to move forward with apartment housing of 364 beds for single students and 66 units of family housing within the near term of the campus plan, B&D recommends that the University partner with local or national student housing developers in a Public-Private Partnership.

**Athletics and Recreation**

Renovation and expansion of the PE Building was identified as the greatest return on initial investment. Significant schedule conflicts are present throughout the day as multiple users and programs are based within the PE Building. As the primary location of athletics, the facility provides many of the training and practice spaces needed for intercollegiate teams. Additionally, the PE Building is the sole location for general student self-directed and group fitness activities. Both programs are negatively affected by high demand on small, inefficient spaces within the building. In order to maximize the opportunities for student-athletes and the general student population, the Project Team recommends an expansion and renovation to the PE Building. It is anticipated that this improvement will create a destination for recreation appealing to the COT student population as well as the main campus student body.

The expansion and renovation project would provide an additional 31,000gsf of space for student recreation. Included in this expansion would be dedicated weight and fitness space, multi-purpose rooms, and a basketball court. This additional space would remove a high-demand set of users from focusing on the main portion of the PE Building and freeing up schedule flexibility for the athletic program. Renovations to portions of the interior of the building are budgeted as well to improve efficiencies and synergies of athletic spaces. The total project cost is estimated at $12 million and would require increase student building fee $180 per semester and the recreation fee $80 per semester. The earliest project opening is projected to be Fall 2015.

**Student Union Building**

The Student Union Building is a decent facility, but underutilized and underappreciated. Located in the lower two levels of Rimrock and Petro Halls, it provides dining services for meal plan residents and other students and visitors as well as convenient access to other facilities within the building such as the Bookstore, the Health Center, Housing office, Student Government, the Ballroom, and various lounge areas. Non-resident students (the majority), however, are not in the habit of utilizing the SUB on a regular basis. This seems to be partly due to its location (at one end of campus) and partly due to a lack of “destination value” for non-resident students. The result is a lack of vitality and excitement normally found in a Union. It was felt that this was a “missed opportunity” that needed to be addressed to enhance the student life experience.

Building a new Student Union in a more centralized location was discussed as a way to solve this problem, but this seemed unrealistic in the context of other needs. Therefore, the decision was
made to look at ways to enhance, improve, and market the facility to broaden awareness and appeal and to increase traffic and usage.

Overall, the existing SUB accommodates a fair amount of the union space demand from main campus students, particularly campus residents. Areas of deficit primarily include lounge spaces, social spaces, study spaces, and a more dynamic food environment. In addition to the lack of certain spaces, the configuration and adjacencies of many of the program elements within the facility are not ideal to maximize foot traffic and use of the building. It should be noted that the Master Plan calls for a new residence hall to be built at the east end of campus. These would be suite-type rooms without kitchens. Students from this facility would utilize meal plans in the SUB.

The food service operations operate well below capacity and are inefficient in terms of space utilization, while most of the equipment is reaching the end of its useful life as well. It was felt that through a reconfiguration and upgrades of the dining services, more students could be better served in less space with greater operational efficiency. The general location, though not ideal for non-resident student, will have to remain where it is.

The Health Center lacks a visible connection to the main campus green or easy way finding through the facility. The Project Team also projects that the current 2,500sf of space is insufficient to meet the needs of the campus and the high priority students place on health services.

While the demolition of the ASC Building was proposed as more of a “big picture” campus planning improvement, this decision will require those services to be moved elsewhere. It was felt that the SUB would be a good location and that these functions would energize the facility and expose additional students to the other services and amenities available in the building.

The Bookstore needs to be expanded and made more visible to the campus and the retail environment improved to increased student traffic.

The unoccupied storage space at the east end of the SUB provides attractive means of capturing additional space for Union activities and has been slated for expansion of the conferencing facilities.

The Project Team developed a concept of a partial renovation and selective expansion to the SUB to address student demand as well as improve use of the facility.

The earliest the project could be completed would be Fall 2015. The total project cost is budgeted at $26 million and would require an increase in the student building fee of $360 per semester. As this project specifically relates to use on the main campus, only main campus students would be assessed this additional fee. Union space needs at the COT have been addressed through targeted renovations in the Technology Building during the summer of 2010.
Next Steps

As Montana State University Billings embarks on improving athletic and auxiliary facilities across the campus, the University should address the following next steps and considerations:

- A campus-wide effort to unveil the Master Plan through a series of presentations and public forums designed to explain the planning process and, more importantly, by explaining which particular projects, of the many that were discussed, were selected to move forward and why.

- A detailed project programming effort should be implemented for each project or series of projects to confirm assumptions, square footage projections, functional adjacencies, and space priorities for the proposed projects. This document will confirm cost assumptions and provide important data for the student referendum effort. This document will provide essential information on requirements of the facilities for selected design teams and enable those projects to more forward more efficiently.

- Student fee funded facilities will require a successful student referenda. A detailed feasibility study should be conducted to assess the support of the proposed recreation and/or SUB projects through qualitative and quantitative methods. Students should be educated on the development of the project concept and the benefits and costs associated with improvements. A clear and thoroughly planned referendum campaign will highlight those discussion points and enable the student body to make and educated choice at the polls.

- Fundraising for the discussed projects will assist in lowering the fee burden on students. These efforts coordinated by the University can be viewed as a commitment to improvements of student spaces and as a partnership with students, increasing the likelihood of successful referenda.