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# WKU Commons project move ahead by blending the old, new

By AARON MUDD [amudd@bgdailynews.com](mailto:amudd@bgdailynews.com)

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Once a 1930s-era indoor basketball court that was redesigned in the 1960s into the space it is today, Western Kentucky University’s Helm Library is transforming yet again – this time into the WKU Commons.

“When we’re finished, you’ll have a lot more students spending time here,” Bryan Russell, WKU’s chief facilities officer, said Thursday as he led members of the news media on a tour of the construction site for the \$35 million project.

Between June and December of last year, the project underwent an initial demolition phase. Now phase II is picking up steam, with Paducah-based firm A&K Construction selected as the low bidder.

The WKU Commons at Helm Library – complete with multiple dining options and a blend of study and social space – will be finished by summer 2021 and open for students that fall, officials said.

“We’re actually modernizing the building but keeping it true to its history,” WKU spokesman Bob Skipper said.

On Thursday, workers were tearing up the maple wood floorboards that made up its historic basketball court, elements of which officials want to use in the completed project. The court’s jump circle, however, will be preserved and highlighted in its original location.

Dating back to 1931 and once referred to as the Big Red Barn, the building that houses WKU’s Helm Library offers a glimpse into early campus life. In those days, it was situated opposite the university’s football field, then located where WKU’s iconic colonnade now stands.

Now, campus leaders want to rekindle student life at the top of WKU’s hill and align it with what today’s students expect from a university.

Computer renderings for the project released last spring show a modernistic glass facade that offers a glimpse into student activity across three floors.

The interior follows an open concept design, with the ground floor connecting to the second floor through a social stairway, which combines seating space with gently rising steps and landings. Bookshelves and study space is depicted on the third floor.

“You’ll find that the bottom floor is more of the dining (space), and as you go up the building gets quieter,” said Kerra Ogden, one of the project’s managers.

The project is funded through a partnership between the university and Aramark, WKU’s long-term dining services provider. Funding for the project was included when the 20-year contract was negotiated.

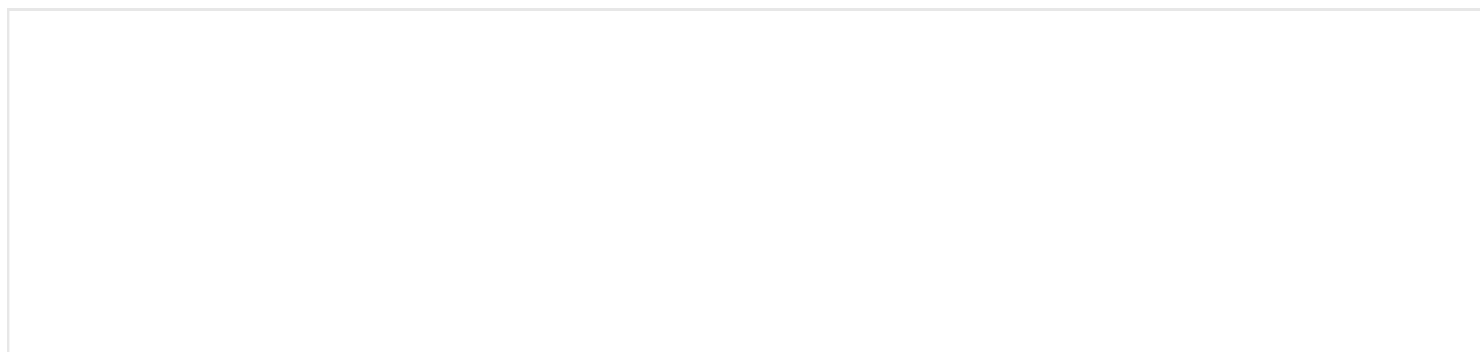
Once the new WKU Commons is completed, officials said Garrett Conference Center will be demolished and converted into greenspace. In recent years, the center has housed a hodgepodge of campus services, from a food court to a testing center. Replacing the center is a necessary step to keep WKU’s student life experience fresh, Russell said.

“If you do not continue to make improvements, people will stop coming,” Russell said. “You have to continue to improve and change.”

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SLIDE SHOW: A look inside the WKU Commons at Helm Library construction site

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## Aaron Mudd

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