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Work to Begin Soon on MSCC's \$5 Million 'Safe Room,' Wellness Center

All of the paperwork has been completed, a construction firm has been hired, and dirt work will begin soon on a combination "safe room" and wellness center at Mid-South Community College.

With the help of a \$784,010 grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the facility will include a large amount of space designed to provide temporary protection to students, employees, and local residents in the event of tornadoes and/or severe straight-line winds. In addition \$250,000 of a Title III Predominantly Black Institutions grant awarded in October 2011 will support the inclusion of amenities to enhance student activities designed to increase minority student retention to goal achievement.

"Mid-South Community College believes it is vitally important not only to provide a safe environment for education but also to promote confidence within the community about the safety and security of their students and citizens," said Dr. Glen Fenter, MSCC president.

“Shelters of this design provide peace of mind to college officials, parents and the general public and, more importantly, protect students, children, and the elderly who live in close proximity to the College.”

Designed by Pat Kelley Magruder Architects of West Memphis in collaboration with Wittenberg, Delony & Davidson Architects of Little Rock, the 34,650 square foot structure will be built by Kinco Construction Company of Little Rock. Kinco is familiar with the college through its work on the Marion Berry Renewable Energy Center on MSCC’s North Campus.

The initial phase of the wellness center construction will cost approximately \$5.25 million and will be completed by Jan. 1, 2013.

The safe room will be technologically connected to the area’s weather warning systems so that when an alarm is sounded, whether day or night, the facility lights will come on and the doors will open automatically.

“Anyone in the area can seek shelter in the building and be protected from the elements,” Dr. Fenter said. “The safe room is designed to withstand all sorts of adverse weather conditions.”

When the shelter is not needed to protect students, employees, and area residents from severe weather, it will meet numerous other needs for the campus and community.

Title III funds will support the inclusion of a gymnasium which will be used by the Greyhound sports teams as well as physical education classes and intramural teams, classrooms, a fitness room for students and staff, dressing rooms, and a training room.

“The Wellness Center will serve as a vital location for students and members of the community to gather,” said Dr. Dwayne J. Scott, MSCC Vice President for Student Affairs. “It will serve as a multipurpose facility that will allow for unique programming opportunities in the areas of recreation and cultural awareness activities.”

“The Wellness Center will allow MSCC to promote healthy living styles, social awareness, and intellectual growth among faculty, staff, and members of the community.”

Jason Carmichael, MSCC Dean of Students and Athletic Director, said he expects the facility to be an instant hit with students.

“I think it’s going to be a hub for campus activities, and we’re very excited about what it will mean to our campus,” Carmichael said. “The wellness center is going to give us a situation where we can foster an environment that’s healthy and nurturing for our students.”

“We feel like this facility will help us fill in some of the gaps in our students’ lives. Our institution does a great job in the classroom, and we’re always trying to program events that make sense relative to our students’ needs. We’re thrilled with the physical and social components we will be able to offer in the new building. We consistently see on our surveys that our students are looking for social engagement on our campus, and the wellness center will give us the physical location we need to provide that.”

Higher education research shows that social engagement is a very important factor in the retention of students—particularly among African-American males who have the lowest retention rate of all community college students.

On the sports side of the equation, the center will give the Greyhounds a place to call their own.

“If everything goes as planned, we could be playing in there as early as February 2013, and we’re excited about that possibility,” Carmichael said. “The Marion and West Memphis school districts have been wonderful to allow us use of their great facilities, but having our own gym will give us more options for games and practices.”

“I’m looking forward to scheduling games on Monday and Thursdays and having the flexibility to include a more robust slate of home games. We’re also excited about the potential to host tournaments, jamborees, and summer camps.”

Chris Parker, head coach of the men’s basketball team, said the new building will provide multiple benefits to the college and community.

“The Wellness Center will be a great addition for our campus and will help promote the overall health of our community,” Parker said. “It will give our Health and Physical Education program a home that enables our students to focus on developing healthy lifestyle habits for a higher quality of life.”

“In addition, it is very exciting for our campus and community to be able to experience the unique atmosphere that will be created as the home of Greyhound

basketball. The plans for our gymnasium put our fans right on top of the action, surrounding our opponent, and will help create one of the most exciting sporting environments in the Mid-South. I'm excited about the opportunity to create an incredible home-court advantage."

Women's coach Kim Turner said the facility will be welcomed by the Lady Greyhounds.

"We will be able to establish some traditions, and it will help put us on the map in athletics," she said. "It will also help with recruiting because one of the first things players want to know is where they will play. It's really hard to call someone else's gym your home, no matter how nice it is. Having our own gym will give the girls a sense of home."

"Practice will be more convenient as well because the players won't have to drive off campus; they'll be able to walk. We'll also be able to help players with injuries since we'll have our own training room. And we will have better opportunities for conditioning. The wellness center is going to be a great asset to the basketball program."

The building will be capable of seating 700-800 people with moveable chairs and tables for larger events. Long-range plans call for a "black box" theater area that could be used for performances and presentations.

The building's lobby will have the potential to serve as a gathering place for students, something the college currently lacks.

"This is an important piece of our efforts to engage and retain more of our students, and we're hoping we can grow and evolve this area," Dr. Fenter said. "We are certainly interested in expanding the building as we find the resources."

"It has been designed in such a way that it can be expanded as funding becomes available. We believe the first phase will work for us in the short term, and we will continue to pursue long-term opportunities that will better serve the ultimate needs of our institution and our community."

FEMA funding for the safe room came from the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program which provides resources for implementation of long-term hazard mitigation measures with a goal of reducing the loss of life and property due to natural disasters.