

Building for young minds in East Peoria

Construction under way at East Peoria Community High School, Central Junior High

LESLIE RENKEN/ JOURNAL STAR

The new school board meeting room is nearly complete Thursday morning in Central Junior High School's new addition.

EAST PEORIA —

Hammers bang. Drills screw. Brushes paint. Brooms sweep. Dust flies.

Central Junior High and East Peoria Community High are abuzz with the sights and sounds of a busy construction site as the additions being built onto the two schools near completion.

The 53,000-square-foot addition at the junior high includes a new gymnasium, cafeteria, kitchen, band and chorus rooms, a fitness room, multi-use meeting room and District 86 administrative offices.

At the high school, the 39,000 square feet added will allow for 17 new classrooms, a new kitchen, cafeteria and a main entrance with a security office.

Late February is the completion date for both locations, but the timetable may hedge a bit into March.

“Our biggest challenge in this project has been the weather,” said Elementary School District 86 Superintendent Tony Ingold. “Everything got really, really wet and took a lot of rain. We had to wait for everything to dry out.”

Rain and cold weather have hampered the original finish date at the junior high by a few weeks. It was scheduled to be done at the end of this month.

Costs of the projects — \$11 million for the junior high and \$13.3 million at the high school — are within budget. Funding came from the school districts and from revenue generated from a portion of the city’s sales tax.

There is still plenty of work to be done at both schools before the districts can welcome students, staff and the community into the new additions.

At the high school, flooring still needs to be installed in the cafeteria and kitchen. When that is completed, crews will move in the new kitchen equipment, enough to serve food for 1,150 students.

On the second-level addition, shiny new lockers line the corridor of classrooms. Each classroom

is painted in a neutral beige color, similar to that of the lockers, and outfitted with a pair of wipe boards.

In place of televisions, the classrooms are equipped with a ceiling projector and pull down projector screen for teachers to display information from the Internet. Wall clocks, which are controlled by a global positioning system, and audio announcement systems complete the otherwise empty rooms.

Technology also was used to enhance energy efficiency in the classrooms: Occupancy sensors will automatically turn off lights when a room is empty.

“This is when it really gets exciting,” said East Peoria High School Principal Paul Whittington in anticipation of finally using the new space. “I’m anxious to see the students’ reaction. It’s very open, bright and user-friendly.”

When the cafeteria and kitchen are done, renovation of the existing lunchroom will start. The area will be transformed into a fine arts wing, which is expected to be completed by August for the fall semester.

The goal of the junior high’s addition is to alleviate overcrowding at the school. Space is tight, whether students are eating lunch or practicing for a sport.

Students in band and chorus now have their own classrooms, with ample storage for instruments near the gym.

The kitchen will double in size, allowing staffers more room while preparing lunch for the other six schools in the district.

A larger lunchroom allows for more tables and an additional lunch line. “We think this will allow them more time to eat and a little more time to socialize,” said Ingold.

The hardwood floor in the 15,000-square-foot gym is halfway complete. Its large size and upstairs balcony area will allow multiple sports teams to hold practices simultaneously.

The junior high also will be able to hold daily physical education classes, something that is required by the state, but because of space constraints they currently are not able to do.

Bleachers lining either side of the gym will allow seating for 1,800 to 2,000 people. Plans are for the space to host the school’s upcoming eighth-grade graduation ceremony in the spring. The newly installed sound system assures there is no bad seat in the house.

“They fired it up the other day and sounds pretty good,” said Ingold.

School officials expected to move into the new District 86 administrative offices Friday and officially start working from them Monday.

“We’re just excited to see it open and ready to go,” said Ingold. “This has really turned out nice.”

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