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The University of Oregon's student union is in an ideal location, the very center of campus. On any given day, it welcomes more students than most other buildings. Its location and social appeal draw students regardless of interests or majors. The same can be said for the student rec center, conveniently located between apartment complexes to the south and academic buildings to the north. The two buildings combine to provide the non-academic core for all students.

"It's about providing a rich environment outside of the classroom," says Jeff Weitzel, Assistant Coordinator of the Craft Center in the union. "That's what the EMU's doing. That's what the SRC is doing."

Yet the buildings are reaching the end of their lifespans. The student union is not an energy-efficient space, and the rec center can no longer accommodate a growing student body. The University of Oregon has responded by proposing new renovations to the buildings. But first, during the week of November 28, a referendum on the projects determined whether students support a fee that would fund 70 percent of the \$160 million in renovations. Students would potentially pay for buildings that they'll never set foot in.

The union first opened its doors in 1950. Since that time, renovations in the '60s and '70s have added many additional doors.

"There are 89 exterior doors to the EMU," Weitzel says. "It's a maze."

According to Weitzel, the seemingly vast space in the union does not provide sufficient resources to students and groups. He says there aren't enough workstations, and the majority of the 180 ASUO-recognized student organizations don't have official rooms. He is also concerned with the sustainability of the building.

“All those windows are single pane. We’re heating that space, and it’s just going right into outer space,” he says.

Meanwhile, the rec center faces problems of its own, even though the building opened 50 years after the union in 2000.

Molly Kennedy, the Assistant Director of Operations at the rec center, says up to 7,000 students visit the rec on any given day, nearly triple that of what was originally expected when it was built. To compensate, the staff has turned racquetball courts into cycling studios, a juice bar into a bouldering area and closets into office spaces.

“We have essentially retrofitted every space we can,” Kennedy says. “We want to be able to provide more space for not only physical education classes but also open recreation.”

The proposed rec center has a two-year design period and one-year construction period. It’s expected opening date is in the fall of 2014. The union is projected to open one year later.

Dylan Scandalios, a union board member, says he doesn’t have a problem with not seeing the finished product. He acknowledges he won’t have to pay the fee because he will graduate before it is introduced in the fall of 2012, but he says he would still support the renovations even if he did have to pay.

“I want my school to still be sought after by prospects in the future, so that my school ends up giving me a good reputation,” he says. “These buildings can help with that.”

Scandalios says the new union will be a destination. He wants the new building to be a place where all students can get involved and meet people.

Rochelle Fredrickson, a freshman majoring in English, is against the renovations. She says she's surprised the UO is even trying to pass the referendum at this time.

"Students cannot afford another raise in their tuition, especially for something that doesn't even apply to them and especially with the bad economy," she says.

But architects from multiple firms have already started designing models for the new buildings. Walker Templeton with SERA Architects is one of the designers of the [union](#), and he is listening closely to user-groups to ensure it meets the needs of students such as Scandalios. Jeff Shaw with Robertson Sherwood Architects is designing a new [rec center](#) and also listening closely to students.

One November evening two weeks before the vote, Templeton and Shaw stand before students in Columbia Hall. They are to deliver presentations detailing their progress in the first six weeks of the design period. The event illustrates the coordination between students and architects.

"There's something very unique about the design process at the University of Oregon," Templeton says in the lecture hall. "It's very client driven. We've modified the schemes to what students have to say."

One of the things students are pushing is sustainability. The user groups' goal for the union is to have one of the best Energy Use Intensities on campus, and possibly one of the best in the nation for a student union. The Energy Use Intensity measures the energy used by a building relative to its size.

In order to achieve this goal, Templeton says he is considering energy transference from high-use areas to low ones, utilizing daylight to reduce lighting costs and keeping 24-hour sections of the building in the same area to reduce operational costs.

Though it's still very early in the design process, Templeton also says he wants the building to be closer to 13<sup>th</sup> street, where it will draw in the student activity from the bustling promenade. He also wants to eliminate the path that runs under the building, forcing students inside rather than underneath it.

Before beginning the design process, however, both teams toured campuses across the nation. The rec center design team toured other recs in the Midwest.

In addition to the team's task of adding more basketball courts, weight lifting spaces and a better aquatics center, Shaw says the goal of the new building is more than just adding space.

“One of the key plans in the student rec is what's called a fusion building, where both the student rec and student union can coexist,” Shaw says. “We want to make as many connections to the union as possible.”

Templeton toured student unions across the country as well. He, along with the user group, went to the University of Ohio, Akron and Cleveland State, among others. He says that although each union was impressive, they did not fit the Oregon style.

“We want people to congregate in this space, not take an escalator right through it,” he says after comparing the University of Ohio's union to a shopping mall.

Students at Ohio State University are enjoying their new [student union](#), which opened in 2010. Jen Cottrell, Assistant Director of Marketing at Ohio State's union, says that in the previous building, some things simply couldn't be fixed because it was too old.

Student government at Ohio State supported the \$118 million building, with students funding over 75 percent.

“The fee was our biggest concern,” says Cottrell. “Any time there is a new student fee, there are concerns for students. We approached this by being really up front with students throughout the process, so there were no surprises and they stayed in the loop.”

At the UO’s union, Weitzel says that every year student fees pay for maintenance such as repairing windows and replacing a bubbling wood floor.

“Those dollars could be going toward providing more services and programming to students,” says Weitzel. “This vision can go a long way to making this a good place for students for the next 50 to 100 years.”

If the project is passed, the student fee of \$105 a year starting in the fall of 2013 will surpass that of maintenance fees charged to students.

With the UO allowing a referendum before bringing the project before the legislature, students have clearly been involved with the process, as they were at Ohio State.

“Now that we have this amazing building, it is popular with all students,” says Cottrell.

A new student union and rec center at the UO will likely lead to similar results, but the referendum must be passed before the project can be realized.

According to Weitzel, if the referendum isn’t passed, there will be up to an 18-month delay because the UO will miss the legislative cycle. However, the architects will continue as scheduled because the funds have already been allocated for the design process. Weitzel says that another referendum will likely be held in the spring, after the architects have had more time to develop their designs. However, a delay in the project would have serious ramifications for the buildings.

“The student fee won’t go up, the project fee won’t go up, but the size of the buildings would have to be smaller,” says Weitzel.

Early Monday morning after the vote, Scandalios is on the indoor track in the rec center, warming up for a jog. Even at 8 a.m. on the first day of finals week, more than ten students are using the track.

“It didn’t pass,” he says with disappointment. “We’ll have to adjust and come back to the students in the spring.”

The architects will continue with the design process, but at this time, students do not support the renovations.

### Sidebar 1

According to the Oregon University System website, the capital construction budget dropped to \$259.8 million for all Oregon universities for the 2011-2013 biennium. The 66 percent decrease from the last biennium is a direct result of the recession. The decrease will also cause a loss of nearly 3,000 jobs created by the budget in the next two years.

A [report](#) by the Oregon University System found that nine jobs are created for every \$1 million spent on construction. With a projected \$160 million budget for the renovations to the UO student union and rec center, 1,440 jobs could potentially be created if the project is approved in the future.

### Sidebar 2

In October the University of Oregon joined the [Billion Dollar Challenge](#), an initiative put on by the Sustainable Endowments Institute to raise \$1 billion in funds for energy-saving upgrades on university campuses nationwide. Oregon will take out a \$1 million revolving loan fund, which is paid back with money saved by lowering operational costs through the upgrades. According to [Greening the Bottom Line](#), a report by the Sustainable Endowments Institute, Iowa State University saw a 29 percent return on investment in the first three years of its participation.

Emily Flynn, Manager of Special Projects at the institute, says joining the challenge is an example of achieving the goals of modern sustainability.

According to Steve Mital, the UO Director for Sustainability, the union and rec center projects began before the UO joined the challenge, but they may choose to participate.