Inside Information

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MSU COLLEGE OF HUMAN MEDICINE INTERIM DEAN ARON SOUSA, M.D.

MSU College of Human Medicine’s interim Dean Aron Sousa signals to the crane operator to raise the beam, marking the top of the MSU Grand Rapids Research Center. The facility is anticipating a late 2017 opening. (Jared Wickerham)

I t was a largely symbolic ceremony, yet the topping off of the Michigan State University Grand Rapids Research Center held great promise for the expansion of the College of Human Medicine’s research capabilities. The raising of the last beam was “a great milestone,” College of Human Medicine Interim Dean Aron Sousa said, told a crowd of researchers, construction workers and others gathered to the shadow of the emerging structure. “The work that will be done in this building will change the lives of people around the world and here in Grand Rapids.”

The topping off in mid-November was significant, because it meant the building is on schedule for an opening later this year, said Richard Temple, project administrator for the college. It also marked 25 weeks of construction — 11,356 total hours — without an injury.

After all, “as a medical school, we really care about health and safety,” Sousa said, noting that the College of Human Medicine includes the Occupational & Environmental Medicine Division, which gathers data and investigates workplace illnesses and injuries for the State of Michigan.

Work on the site had begun eight months earlier with the demolition of the former Grand Rapids Press building on Michigan Street and Monroe Avenue. The new research center, a block west of the College of Human Medicine’s Science Center, will anchor the city’s growing Medical Mile, allowing its researchers to collaborate with physicians and scientists at nearby Spectrum Health, Mercy Health Saint Mary’s, the Van Andel Institute, Grand Valley State University and others.

“It’s the whole environment, as well as this building,” said Dr. Walter Esselman, senior associate dean of research. Creating “a critical mass of researchers in Grand Rapids is important,” he added. “Working together we can do more. It really adds tremendously to the capability of the region.”

Vennie Gore, MSU’s vice president for auxiliary enterprises, called it “a great day to be a Spartan,” eliciting a chorus of “go green,” and “go white.”

Eventually, the building will provide laboratories and office space for 44 principal investigators, each leading six to eight team members, or a total of about 400 jobs. Those top scientists will conduct research into autism, Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s, pediatric neuroscience, cancer and women’s health, much of it already underway in Grand Rapids. That’s in addition to a growing body of medical research on the East Lansing and Flint campuses.

Each one of those principal investigators, and many of their team members, will bring new money into the area in the form of research grants from the National Institutes of Health and other public and private agencies.

When it is fully operational, the research center is expected to generate $35 million per year in economic activity.

The project team includes a joint venture of Clark Construction Co. and Rockford Construction; SmithGroupJJR, which handled engineering and is the architect of record; Eilenberg, which designed laboratory spaces; Kramer Management Group; and MSU Infrastructure Planning and Facilities.

Construction of this project has created $95 million in wages and 795 jobs, and has had immediate impact on our economy, bringing new long-term jobs that allow us to look at the future where we can build projects to meet additional needs,” said Mike VanGessel, CEO of Rockford Construction.

Sam Clark, president of Clark Construction Co., added, “The economic benefits are significant, but pale in comparison to the improvements in human health that will result from the research done in this building.”

The 88,1 million building will be six stories with a seventh floor for service equipment. Construction is expected to be completed by fall of 2017, but the building will not be fully operational until the end of that year.

When completed, the building is expected to be LEED certified because of its minimal impact on the environment and its use of about 70 percent less energy than the national average for laboratory buildings.

The topping off was one more step in the growing relationship between the College of Human Medicine and the West Michigan partners.

“This topping off ceremony is another milestone, another chapter in that story,” Sousa said.

“And now, let’s top of the MSU Grand Rapids Research Center,” he said, motioning with his hand and signaling a crane operator to raise the last beam.

The crane roared to life, slowly raising the girder decorated with an American flag, the MSU Spartan flag and an evergreen tree, symbolizing good luck and prosperity. Two construction workers in a lift rose to meet it, while another waited six floors up to help secure the beam in place.

The teams working in the research center will develop new and better treatments for many diseases, the kind of care that otherwise might be available only in distant cities.

“That means that people can stay home to get that specialized treatment,” Sousa said, “and it also means that people can come to Grand Rapids for that treatment.”

MSU celebrates milestone for new research center