University's recreation center connects campus with city

PSU project team overcame weather-related delays and schedule challenges

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When construction on the Academic Student Recreation Center at Portland State University started in 2007, Southwest Fifth Avenue and Montgomery Street was a quiet corner at the edge of downtown. Two years later, it's a major hub for both the university and Portland.

The design-build team led by Skanska USA carried the connection between campus and city right into the 175,000-square-foot building. The recreation center takes up three floors, between city archives and records in the basement and the fifth floor. The School of Social Work sits on the sixth floor.

The lobby's brick floor blurs the line between indoors and outdoors, following the pattern of the Urban Center Plaza just beyond the plate glass. There, light-rail trains pass every few minutes; buses pass every few seconds.

Skanska built the center as TriMet reconfigured Fifth and Sixth avenues for the new yellow and green MAX lines and bus mall. That created pressure to meet deadlines for two separate projects, said Jason Koski, project superintendent with Skanska.

"Their superintendent and I met daily," Koski said. "We really were like one company."

See CENTER, Page 3

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**PSU Academic Student Recreation Center building**

**Size:** 174,714 square feet

**Design and construction budget:** $69 million

**Design-build team:** Skanska USA Building, Yost Grube Hall Architecture

**Civil/structural engineer:** KPFF Consulting Engineers

**Mechanical/electrical engineer:** Interface Engineering

**Landscape architect:** Lango Hansen Landscape Architects
Center: Some work will help future campus loop project

Continued from Page 1

with the same goal. They had work to do and we had work to do.”

The interwoven schedules caused some headaches, but also had some advantages, said Joe Schneider, project executive with Skanska. “They shut down roads, so we had some more elbow room to do work,” he said.

Winter snow and ice caused workers to lose two weeks that they had to make up over time, Schneider said. TriMet strung live cables for the MAX in February, and opened a busy bus stop next to the building in May.

The recreation center will open Jan. 3, 2010. It offers space for sports as varied as fencing and rock climbing.

Despite the high energy demands of a recreation center that includes a pool and a hot tub, the target is for the project to receive a LEED gold rating. Heat exchangers capture waste heat for pool water.

Other sustainable touches include elliptical exercise machines whose users produce energy for the building. The sport courts are made from Forest Stewardship Council-certified wood, and other rooms use natural linoleum.

Rooftop rainwater is captured and fed into a 50,000-gallon tank for irrigation, sprinklers and toilets.

The building actually will become more efficient in the future. That’s because the university’s campus loop project will bring steam heat and chilled water to meet its heating and cooling needs.

Plans for the recreation center didn’t include the campus loop. Koski said. But, knowing it was coming, Skanska built the connections and piping now to make that project run smoother. Already, a 200-foot-deep well supplies 54-degree water, piped through the building to help its cooling.

“Even if students don’t know everything that went into the building, it’s all part of creating a welcoming environment, said Alex Accetta, Portland State’s director of campus recreation. Some things were made to be unnoticed, he said, such as the ultraviolet filters that reduce the chlorine smell in the pool room.

A place for a pickup badminton match might seem like a minor amenity, but it ties in to the university’s academic programs and the vibrancy of the city, Accetta said. Students who participate in activities outside of class are more likely to graduate, he said.

“The more students are engaged, the more they want to stay on campus,” Accetta said.

Portland State is working toward becoming more of a residential campus by building housing and promoting urban living, spokesman Scott Galagher said. Portland planners laid the groundwork by creating an attractive downtown and providing umpteen ways to travel around campus.

Students need to feel at home in town and on campus, Galagher said. “And part of that is making campus more exciting and useful to the students.”

It works both ways, Accetta said. The other piece is creating a seamless transition so that students can hang out in the recreation center lobby or spill out onto the urban plaza and downtown beyond.

“It’s all about giving them places they want to go,” he said.