

Staff Report

Published: July 22, 2009

It was just a pile of dirt that Chipola College staff, the board of trustees, a legislator and others stood around Tuesday afternoon. But the pile marked the future location of what they believe will be the centerpiece of culture in the five-county region — the Chipola College Center for the Arts.

As officials broke ground on the \$16 million project, excitement was expressed by many.

“Absolutely this will be a showplace for the community that we’ll all be very proud of,” Chipola College President Dr. Gene Prough said.

A project six years in the making, the center is the largest building project in the history of the college since it was built in 1947. Completion of the facility’s construction is estimated just under two years.

The center will be located on the college’s new access road, Prough Drive, just off River Forest Road.

“It really is a dream come true,” Joan Stadskev, Chipola’s director of Fine and Performing Arts said.

The facility is planned to be 56,000 square feet.

The theatre within the center will seat around 650, with a balcony, and will include new dressing rooms, a scene shop and costume shop. An art gallery and reception area is planned, along with a small concession area. The most intriguing feature of the new complex is a black box theater for audiences of 100 or less.

“The public will enjoy the fine and performing artistic work of our students in theatre, music, and art in the new 650-seat proscenium theatre, black box theatre, recital hall, and art galleries,” Stadskev said in a news release. “The space also will provide a strong artistic venue for the Chipola Artist Series and visiting art exhibits. Arts patrons will truly enjoy an aesthetically pleasing and total artistic experience from the moment they enter the center grounds through the final curtain.”

A Tallahassee firm will have overall responsibility for completing the project.



Joan Stadskev, director of Fine and Performing Arts for Chipola College, talks about the Chipola Center for the Arts during a groundbreaking ceremony for the facility Tuesday.

“This is what’s known as a ‘design-build’ project, which brings an architect and contractor together to complete the project from conception to completion within the budget,” Chipola Capital Projects and Contracts Administrator Louy Harris said in the news release.

The construction firm of Allstate/Southland of Tallahassee will serve as the design/build team to provide design, permitting and construction services for project.

Standing on a patch of grass that very well could be the main theater once work is done, Chipola Theater Director Charles Sirmon couldn’t hide his excitement at the groundbreaking.

“This is the culmination of five years of planning and dreaming. The larger theater will enable us to stage big musicals and accommodate large crowds,” Sirmon said in a news release. “The size of the theater will also enhance our educational theater outreach program so that more students will be able to enjoy theater. I’m very excited about the black box theater which will give students the opportunity to work on a smaller stage and produce their own work.”

Sirmon said the technical side of theater also will be largely enhanced, with state-of-the-art systems for rigging, hanging, lighting and set construction.

Theatre consultant Robert Lorelli of New York, who has assisted with a number of major theatre design plans, worked with the college on the project.

The new center will replace the current 350-seat theater, constructed in 1958. The old theater lacks space and restroom facilities. Set construction is currently performed outside, weather permitting. Insufficient dressing room space and the absence of a costume shop are some of the challenges in the current theater.

The Chipola Theater sees an estimated 10,000 visitors per year, according to the college.

In addition to three annual college theater productions, the theater also is home to four annual artist series events, and other performances for thousands of area school children.