

UW-Eau Claire: Construction to begin on County Materials Complex

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The transformation is underway for a 21-acre brownfield site along the Chippewa River to become the largest indoor event venue in northwest Wisconsin — the \$107 million state-of-the-art County Materials Complex — when it opens in spring 2024.

The namesake donors on Monday helped celebrate the groundbreaking of the complex that will house the John and Carolyn Sonnentag Fieldhouse, the Sonnentag Event Center and the Mayo Clinic Health System Diagnostic Imaging and Sports Medicine Center.

The Sonnentags, both University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire alumni, announced in December 2021 they were donating \$70 million to the UW-Eau Claire Foundation for the fieldhouse and event center. The Sonnentags' gift is the largest in university history and among the largest ever given to a regional public university in the country.

"It's just wonderful that after eight years we're finally seeing this project get off the ground," Carolyn Sonnentag said. "John and I couldn't be happier. We said years ago when this was all unveiled that we hoped we'd live long enough to see it. We've got a couple more years (until it opens), but we're going to make it happen."

Chancellor James Schmidt referenced Monday's cold, windy weather when talking about the project that has been years in the making.

"Some said it would be a cold day in hell before this day ever became a reality," Schmidt said. "Well, I'm glad to say we've never given up on our dream and it's clearly a cold day in paradise."

The facility will replace 70-year-old Zorn Arena on campus and accommodate

multiple types of events, including being home to the university's men's and women's basketball games and other athletic tournaments, indoor concerts and other entertainment or sports events. The complex also will have a fitness and wellness facility to reduce pressure on UW-Eau Claire's on-campus recreation and sports spaces.

The complex will add to the growing sports and recreation facilities along Menomonie Street that include Carson Park, the Hobbs Municipal Ice Center, and the John and Fay Menard YMCA Tennis Center.

The Sonnentags' gift will impact UW-Eau Claire and the community for generations, said Terry Weld, Eau Claire City Council president. Weld noted the city has invested \$9.9 million toward the project in infrastructure, sustainable features and capital investments.

"This multiuse event facility will raise the bar for sustainable, energy-efficient design and forward-thinking construction," Weld said. "It will provide and serve as a community shelter in the event of a large-scale emergency or disaster and will play host to sporting and entertainment events for up to 5,000 people. It will create economic growth in our city, bringing hundreds of new jobs and new development to this district and throughout Eau Claire. It will bring tens of thousands of visitors to our region from all over the country."

The public-private building project also includes the \$15 million Mayo Clinic Health System Diagnostic Imaging and Sports Medicine Center within the complex that will offer sports medicine, human performance enhancement and imaging services.

Dr. Gianrico Farrugia, president and CEO of Mayo Clinic, called the facility a "historical milestone for Mayo Clinic and UW-Eau Claire," building on the two organizations' master research collaboration that started five years ago.

"Today's groundbreaking marks the next step in Mayo Clinic Health System's work with UW-Eau Claire and our commitment to the city of Eau Claire," Farrugia said. "The Mayo Clinic Health System Diagnostic Imaging and Sports Medicine Center, as part of the larger complex, will not only provide exceptional care and greater educational and research opportunities for UW-Eau Claire students and the community, but it will also strengthen Eau Claire's position as a premier destination for community primary care and diagnostic care in northwest Wisconsin."

Project partners include Blugold Real Estate, a subsidiary of the UW-Eau Claire Foundation, Mayo Clinic Health System-Northwest Wisconsin, the city of Eau Claire, Visit Eau Claire and UW-Eau Claire.

Complex features

The complex will include:

- A 172,502-square-foot major event facility with a total capacity of 5,000.
- Two-story UW-Eau Claire wellness and recreation facilities.
- Offices for Blugold Athletics.
- Four sport courts suitable for basketball, volleyball, etc.
- A 100-yard artificial turf fieldhouse.
- A Mayo Clinic Health System clinical location offering sports medicine, human performance enhancement and imaging services.
- Surface parking to serve the entire complex, including electric vehicle charging stations.
- Land suitable for complex expansion or development of private businesses that could complement and serve activities at the event and recreation complex.

A sustainable future

Pablo Foundation is donating nearly \$10 million in grants and loans to reduce the carbon footprint in the event center and fieldhouse. UW-Eau Claire and its students, the city of Eau Claire and Xcel Energy also contributed to the sustainability features in the complex.

Among the sustainability highlights are:

- Building will be fully electric and will not consume fossil fuels, significantly reducing overall operational carbon emissions and dramatically increasing carbon offsets.
- Partnership program with Xcel Energy to provide 100% of facility's power requirements from a local, offsite solar PV plant.
- Removal of 80% of total suspended solids from storm water runoff.
- Enhanced sustainability goals of net-zero energy and net-zero carbon.
- LED lighting used throughout the facility.

Project History

The Sonnentags are UW-Eau Claire alumni, with John graduating in 1966 with degrees in business administration and history, and Carolyn graduating in 1967 with a degree in medical technology.

In 2014, the Sonnentags decided to contribute \$10 million in riverfront land that had been the site of the family business, County Concrete, on Menomonie Street and money to the Foundation.

The Sonnentags followed up their earlier contribution in December 2021 with the announcement that they would pay the remainder of the costs for the event center and fieldhouse to make the project a reality.

UW-Eau Claire students voted in April 2021 to support the university's dedicated space in the complex. Each student will contribute \$90 per semester to help pay for the cost of the lease of the facility, with the fee starting when the facility opens.

Jaden Mikoulinskii, Student Senate president, said present and future UW-Eau Claire students will be drawn to the County Materials Complex.

"We need facilities that reflect the quality of a campus and its student and community population," said Mikoulinskii, who will graduate in May. "I can say that I am truly excited to come back as an alumna to UW-Eau Claire and to this specific event center to participate in all of the joy, the life, the light and the community that it will house."

Domino effect

The impending construction project already has had a domino effect in the area along Menomonie Street.

Eau Claire-based Pablo Group is set to build a 128-suite hotel adjacent to the complex this summer; the SpringHill Suites by Marriott project is scheduled to open in 2024.

A restaurant with a patio on the banks of the Chippewa River nearby also is planned by Pablo Group.