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\$70 million gift to UW-Eau Claire Foundation puts Sonnentag Project on fast track, charts course for success for northwestern Wisconsin

(Eau Claire, WI) – When John and Carolyn Sonnentag met as students at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire in the 1960s, no one could have predicted that they would fall in love and marry. Or that the love they had for each other and the university that brought them together would one day change the face of life in northwestern Wisconsin.

The UW-Eau Claire Foundation announced today that the Sonnentags have committed a gift of cash and land valued at approximately \$70 million for the construction of the County Materials Complex. The development, which will include the Sonnentag Event Center and the John and Carolyn Sonnentag Field House, is located on the banks of the Chippewa River in Eau Claire. The gift from the Sonnentags, one of the largest of its kind in state history, will solidify the event center that was first proposed in 2014.

“Never in my wildest dreams would I imagine that 100% of the philanthropy for a project would come from one donor,” said Kimera Way, president of the UW-Eau Claire Foundation. “This has been a long and winding road over the past few years, but this incredible gift will improve the quality of life for all Blugolds and it will benefit Eau Claire and northwestern Wisconsin.”

The Sonnentag Project will revitalize Eau Claire thanks to a unique public-private partnership that includes UW-Eau Claire, the UW-Eau Claire Foundation, Mayo Clinic Health System, the city of Eau Claire and Visit Eau Claire.

The 170,500-square-foot off-campus facility will replace Zorn Arena, the 70-year-old building that is currently home to the Blugold men’s and women’s basketball teams. The new multipurpose facility will have a capacity to hold 5,000 people, and in addition to the Sonnentag Event Center, will house a center for health and wellbeing, facilities for the Blugold men’s and women’s basketball teams, athletic department offices and a 100-yard field house. Additionally,

Mayo Clinic Health System will construct a sports medicine and imaging clinic. The total cost of the project is approximately \$107 million.

“Carolyn and I feel that the UW-Eau Claire and Eau Claire communities have made such a great contribution to our lives that we want to give back in whatever capacity we can,” John Sonnentag said when the couple announced it was giving 25 acres of property to Blugold Real Estate, a subsidiary of the UW-Eau Claire Foundation, in 2014. “We are very pleased to make this project happen.”

John Sonnentag graduated from UW-Eau Claire in 1966 with degrees in business administration and history. Carolyn Sonnentag graduated from UW-Eau Claire in 1967 with a degree in medical technology. After graduating from UW-Eau Claire, John joined the family business, which at the time was named County Concrete Corp. Carolyn later joined the business and worked as a bookkeeper in the finance office. John’s father, Merlin, founded Sonnentag Concrete and Gravel in Marathon in 1946. The company offered concrete block and aggregate in the first two decades, but under John’s leadership, the company expanded its product line and began offering concrete pipe and other precast products. The company was renamed County Materials Corp. in 2003, and though it is still headquartered in Marathon County, the company now has additional locations in Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa, Indiana, Missouri and Florida.

UW-Eau Claire students voted to support the university’s dedicated space in the project in an April 2021 referendum. Sixty-one percent of the students who voted in the spring referendum supported using \$90 in segregated fees per student per semester to help pay for the cost to lease the facility. The student fees will begin when the facility opens in spring 2024.

“The generosity of the Sonnentags is simply remarkable,” UW-Eau Claire Chancellor James Schmidt said. “This is truly an institution-shaping gift that will have a positive impact on tens of thousands of people for decades to come.

“I’ll never forget August 5, 2014, when we first announced their record-setting gift to the Foundation — land and money to jumpstart development of a replacement to Zorn Arena on Menomonie Street,” Schmidt said. “They secured and donated more than 25 acres of land on the Chippewa River, including an industrial site previously occupied by their family business, County Materials Corp. The Sonnentags have been committed to creating a venue to host large events in this community since I arrived on campus, and this gift brings their vision to life.”

It is rare for a regional public university the size of UW-Eau Claire to receive a gift of this magnitude, and it is a testament to the long history of philanthropy that has supported the UW-Eau Claire Foundation. The UW-Eau Claire Foundation launched its \$125 million Sustaining Human Innovation campaign last month, and Way said more than \$70 million has already been received.

“You would be hard-pressed to find a public university foundation of our size receiving gifts of this nature,” Way said. “It just doesn’t happen every day. We are so fortunate to have alumni

like John and Carolyn Sonnentag who genuinely support the mission of UW-Eau Claire and believe in investing in our future.”

At its July meeting, the University of Wisconsin System Board of Regents authorized UW-Eau Claire to lease space in the Sonnentag Event Center, which will be approximately one mile west of UW-Eau Claire’s main campus. The facility will be at the center of a growing sports and recreation district along Menomonie Street in the Randall Park neighborhood that includes Carson Park, the Hobbs Municipal Ice Center and the Menard YMCA Tennis Center.

In 2014, the Sonnentags gave the Blugold Real Estate Foundation land along the Chippewa River that had been home to their family’s business, County Materials. They also acquired the Student Transit property adjacent to their property and donated that to the Foundation. The resulting facility will be owned by the Eau Claire Community Complex (ECCC). The ECCC is a nonprofit corporation established by Blugold Real Estate (a subsidiary of the UW-Eau Claire Foundation) and Mayo Clinic Health System. UW-Eau Claire will lease the event center and field house while Mayo Clinic Health System will lease its space.

The Eau Claire City Council approved \$7.88 million for the project and \$4.19 million in public infrastructure improvements around the facility at its Oct. 26 meeting. The city council voted unanimously to approve the rezoning and general development plan for the Sonnentag Complex at its Nov. 23 meeting.

Site preparation is underway, and construction is expected to begin in the spring of next year. Construction is expected to take two years, with the hope that UW-Eau Claire’s 2024 spring commencement ceremony will be held in the Sonnentag Event Center.

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The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire is a leader for academic excellence, undergraduate research, and high-impact practices in the University of Wisconsin System. More than 10,500 students are drawn to this campus where innovation, leadership, diversity and inclusion, and stewardship are core values. Average class size at UW-Eau Claire is 27 with a faculty/student ratio of 1:21. UWEC is noted for low debt for graduates and high value at a competitive tuition rate and has ranked among best public regional universities in the Midwest for 25 years. The growing city of Eau Claire is located about 90 miles east of Minneapolis, with a population of about 70,000.