

NAACP leader honored to have school auditorium named for her

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Jacqueline Owens and state Sen. Edith Prague, right, listen to Owens' introduction before she speaks at the groundbreaking ceremony for a new classroom wing and 800-seat auditorium at Kelly Middle School in Norwich on Thursday. The auditorium is being dedicated to Owens.

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Ground broken for addition at Kelly

Norwich - NAACP President Jacqueline Owens stood Thursday on a spot on the Kelly Middle School lawn that soon will be an auditorium that bears her name.

School officials voted unanimously and with a standing ovation Tuesday to name the new 800-seat auditorium in the \$40.2 million Kelly Middle School renovation for Owens. About 50 people again applauded her at Thursday's groundbreaking ceremony for the much-anticipated project.

Minutes after VIPs and 30 Kelly Middle School students flicked loose sand into the wind with their golden shovels, School Building Committee Chairman Charles Jaskiewicz said he would sign construction contracts that afternoon. Work is expected to start next week.

Mel Strauss, project manager for The Pike Co., said the erosion-control measures would be put in place first. Officials hope to pour foundations and erect steel before winter.

Owens called it "truly an honor" that the auditorium will be named for her, adding after the ceremony that she could think of others deserving of the tribute.

"Jackie, there is no person more deserving than you," Jaskiewicz said at the podium, anticipating her later comments.

Calling her "Mother Owens," Mayor Benjamin Lathrop also turned Owens' words around Thursday.

"It's an honor to know you," Lathrop said.

Owens has followed progress of the Kelly project from idea through approvals, along with all other major activities of the Norwich school board. Although a resident of Lebanon, Owens has been a champion of education in Norwich for the past 40 years and attends nearly all board meetings.

The project was approved by Norwich voters in November 2007. Officials had hoped that the economic recession would bring in favorable bids, allowing them to add optional features. That came to fruition earlier this week, when the School Building Committee affirmed that new science labs at the top of the wish list will be part of the project.

Norwich also saved money in an unconventional way through a corporate partnership with Pfizer Inc., where Jaskiewicz works. Volunteer hours and donations of equipment by Pfizer were quantified so that Norwich qualified for \$2.9 million in no-interest bonds for the project, saving the city \$1.25 million over the 30-year life of the bonds.

Michael Caron, former state representative and Pfizer director of science and medical public affairs, turned his attention to the seats just outside the VIP tent Thursday. That's where students representing each homeroom at the school sat. Other students opened windows in classrooms with a view of the ceremony and crammed their heads into the screen to watch.

"You're going to have a great facility," Caron told the students.

Principal Michael Cain brought the student representatives to the podium at the end of the ceremony to offer a collective "thank you" to the gathering.

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