

Always synonymous with superior education the academic initials now mean construction

BY CHERYL MAH

With more than \$600 million in institutional and housing projects under construction and in the planning stages, the University of BC is one of the busiest development sites in the province.

The 75 year old campus is in the midst of a construction boom that has not been seen since the 1980s with much needed new academic facilities leading the way.

About 80 percent of current construction activity is for institutional projects with 20 per cent for non institutional, including improved services and amenities, according to Dennis Pavlich, UBC's Vice President of External and Legal Affairs.

"There's a huge amount of construction. The huge majority is really in developing the research capacity and the teaching capacity of the university," he says. "There's a lot of planning that has to be done, a huge amount of consulting and we've been doing that."

Most of the construction is being driven by research funding through the Canada Foundation for Innovation, with matching funds from BC Knowledge Development Fund.

Through grants, almost a billion dollars has been committed to finance research infrastructure at post-secondary facilities, institutes and hospitals.

Together the two funds provide 80 per cent of capital while the university is responsible for the remaining 20 per cent, according to Al Poettcker, President and CEO of UBC Properties Trust.

Despite fiscal challenges often cited by government, neither Poettcker nor Pavlich are surprised at the amount of funding available to post-secondary institutions.

Pavlich says fortunately government recognizes research at universities is a significant component of the strategy for Canada to maintain a competitive position in an increasingly knowledge-based global economy.

The significant investment by the provincial and federal governments is not only driving campus construction at UBC but across Canada, adds Poettcker.

The largest project under construction is the 400,000 square foot Life Sciences Centre, established through a \$125 million grant from the provincial government.

To open in August, it is one of three new medical school facilities being built in BC as part of the government's \$134 million life sciences initiative to increase the number of first year medical school spaces in BC from 128 to 224 by 2005.

"This new building has an opportunity to change the way we teach and increase the number of graduates," continues Poettcker.

The facility will consist of laboratories, offices, classrooms and lecture theatres for medical research and education – enough space to double the number of medical students at UBC by 2010.

The commitment from both levels of government to increase the number of graduates in the medical, computer science and engineering fields as well as advance significant research in biotechnology is a big reason for the level of construction activity in the past two years and the next few years.

The second largest project is the redevelopment of the Main Library, one of the very first buildings to be built on campus.

To be renamed the Irving K. Barber Learning Centre, the \$60 million project incorporates the historic core of UBC's main library into a learning and research facility.

Scheduled to be completed by May 2006, the Centre is being built in phases and will add 20,000 square feet of space.

The Centre will be the first in Canada to integrate information resources, research activities and interdisciplinary learning supporting into a single building.

Other notable research infrastructure projects include The Institute for Computing Information and Cognitive Systems and the Michael Smith Building, both slated for completion this year.

The \$58 million Museum of Anthropology renewal is also a key project among the 12 buildings currently underway and in the planning stages. It will feature a building

extension, a digital resource network, labs and expansion of public gallery space and public education facilities.

Although the majority of construction activity is to meet urgent institutional needs, non-institutional growth is an equally important component of the university's future development.

The university's official community plan (OCP) adopted in 1997, outlines eight neighbourhoods to form an integrated community known as University Town.

"One of the characteristics of our OCP and what I think makes it a real leader is its emphasis on sustainability. The university is held to some very high standards and targets."

Key targets in the plan include 50 per cent live-work for people who work or study on campus. Another emphasis for the university is reducing single occupancy vehicles (SOV).

"We've been known for years as a commuting campus. In 2002, almost 70 per cent of the first year class came from the Lower Mainland," says Poettcker, adding with the number of students living on campus growing dramatically, 3000 new living spaces will be added by 2006 to meet the demand.

Meanwhile, the number of SOV to UBC has fallen by close to 20 per cent since 1997 and one third of parking facilities on campus have been eliminated. In addition, new facilities such as the Life Sciences Centre do not include parking spaces.

An innovative discount student transit pass introduced last September called the U-Pass program has successfully increased transit ridership by 53 per cent.

UBC has the second busiest transit station in the Lower Mainland, notes Poettcker.

The university's sustainability commitment applies to all institutional buildings as well.

"We are striving to meet the equivalent of LEED silver on all of our institutional buildings," says Poettcker, noting sustainable building practice also apply to multi-residential developments.

"We are leaders in trying to generate different standards that take into account all of the various issues that go into sustainability. We stress green building technology is only one component of sustainability. We stress sustainable delivery of services. LEED is not designed to recognize those elements."

Both Poettcker and Pavlich believe there should be more points in the system for de-emphasizing the car and promoting mass transit.

Construction is underway on two of the eight planned neighbourhoods: Chancellor Place and Hawthorn Place. The six others are University Boulevard, Thunderbird, East Campus, Gage South, North Campus and South Campus.

Housing, retail and public space will be created on campus over the next two decades with the OCP targeting building out by 2030. The resident population is forecast to grow to 24,000.

Market housing is developed on the basis of 99 year prepaid leases, which are managed by UBC Properties. Commercial developers currently building on campus include Polygon Homes and Intracorp Developments. Net revenue from the land leased for housing will be invested in the University Endowment to fund research, teaching and learning as well as support capital improvements.

Poettcker says the revenue is a huge benefit to the university, allowing it to also simultaneously upgrade infrastructure services.

"A lot of UBC's initial infrastructure is now in dire need of replacement and repair. Quite a bit of the construction activity relates to simply replacing that old infrastructure," he says, estimating the work to be valued between \$70-90 million.

"We've done most of the servicing now for the university. After this May/June, there will be much less construction on the roads."

The last major infrastructure work involves transforming the existing bus loop on University Boulevard into a below grade transit station. Several five-storey buildings will then be built on the site.

After the completion of the Life Sciences Centre and the Main Library, construction activity levels will decrease although a number of smaller institutional projects in the range of \$10-15 million along with student housing projects are still slated to go ahead.

But how fast these projects will get started or if they will start depends on market conditions, notes Poettcker.

Smaller projects will have a more difficult time getting off the ground as large projects come online and stretch construction resources in the province.

More than \$8 billion in major capital cost projects across BC are expected to be underway in the next six years.

With construction industry entering a period of strong growth in preparation for the 2010 Olympics, Poettcker cites familiar concerns over construction costs and shortage of skilled labour.

“We’re finding costs for institutional projects are starting to go up exponentially and it’s probably inappropriate for public bodies to try to build in periods of tremendous demand,” he says. “We’re seeing increase of 10-15 per cent a year and over a number of years, that gets to be quite expensive. We were fortunate. Our building program started about two years ago so a lot of our buildings got built in a more favorable environment.”

Poettcker, who has a background in economics, does not believe in costs continuing to climb without any abatement.

“There’s a limit to what some of these projects can afford to pay. At some point, we will have to look at different ways of doing things. I think the market will find a way to resolve the issues,” he says.