Arena may get $60M facelift

Clemson trustees give initial OK to proposal

By Ron Barnett
Staff writer

CLEMSON — The Clemson Universityboard of trustees is hoping to "Rock the John" into the stratosphere of the collegiate basketball world, if a project they set in motion Friday goes as proposed.

Fans and students celebrated the start of the 2013-14 basketball season Friday night at Littlejohn Coliseum with an event called Rock the John that included fire-juggling and a dunking contest.

Earlier in the day, the board, acting under the premise that the more than 40-year-old coliseum is drab compared to facilities of elite college basketball programs, gave "pre-concept" approval to a renovation that Clemson officials hope would give Littlejohn a wow-factor worthy of a national power.

The action allows the athletic department and IPTAY to further develop plans and begin fund-raising for upgrades that could cost from $60 million to $80 million.

The project, as well as other athletic facilities projects approved Friday, would be paid for entirely through revenues generated by the athletic department and private gifts, according to Brett Dalton, vice president for finance and operations.

"No student fees, no tuition, and no state dollars would be used," Dalton told *The Greenville News*.

The coliseum project was one of a half dozen athletic facilities projects the board gave pre-concept approval to.

Also given the go-ahead were a new academic center, a new multipurpose meeting space at Memorial Stadium, complete renovation of suites at Memorial Stadium, a new football operations facility and upgrades to the tennis complex.

The board gave final approval to $8.85 million in improvements at the Doug Kingsmore (baseball) Stadium and the third phase of the WestZone project at Memorial Stadium, estimated to cost between $6.5 million and $8.5 million.

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DAN RADAKOVICH, athletics director

been in the forefront of athletic facilities and accommodations for our student athletes," Athletics Director Dan Radakovich said. "These projects provide a roadmap to continuing Clemson's tradition of excellence in our facilities."

The board approved the projects without discussion, after they were recommended by its Finance and Facilities Committee.

The Littlejohn project would the first major renovation of the facility since major roof repairs were done a few years ago. Minor interior improvements were made at that time, but nothing like what officials have in mind now.

"While Littlejohn Coliseum currently meets the functional needs to operate the (men's and women's basketball) programs, the facility lacks inspirational and stimulating features requisite for national-level attention and growth," a document submitted to the board by university planners says.

"A major renovation aimed at creating a high-energy, quality environment that is highly engaging for players and spectators is critical."

Before work can begin, the board would have to OK more detailed plans, which would then need approval from the state Commission on Higher Education, the Joint Bond Review Committee and the Budget and Control Board, Dalton said.

The proposed schedule would have the project completed by the fall of 2016.

"There's been a lot of discussion, debate and analysis to date as to what the best solution would be for the basketball arena, whether to rebuild and remodel Littlejohn or whether to build a new coliseum," Dalton told the board.

"The decision has been made by the administration to recommend to the board that we have a significant renovation, rebuilding of Littlejohn Coliseum because it's far more cost effective and can be done in a more timely and efficient manner."

The playing area and 8,500-seat arena bowl would be renovated, and the exterior would be upgraded, with transparent materials used to bring more light into the building, the board document says.

"Renovating the building to be a richer, more energetic, high-performance environment will add significant value to the university and provide a competitive venue for the basketball program," it says.

"The new Littlejohn Coliseum will inspire and engage both the players and the fans through a whole new interior layout and design that will be extremely media rich."

The football operations facility, which would be built next to the new indoor practice building and outdoor practice fields, is needed, according to documents, because football players and coaches now have to ride a tram from the West End Zone through the parking lot and across Perimeter Road to get to the practice areas.

"This will be a much more efficient utilization of the space and a much safer and more effective way for the players and coaches to move from their locker rooms back and forth to the training facilities and the practice facilities," Dalton told the board.

It would be 60,000 to 80,000 square feet and cost about $30 million, according to board documents.