

# Centre and Beyond: A Sit-Down with Neil Henry

by Joel MEGGS

There is no doubt that most students have had the chance to watch workers from Meridian diligently building the new student centre. The building is coming along quickly now, despite a few setbacks.

Also, most students have probably had the chance to stroll through the new modular classrooms. Many have expressed favourable opinions about the new structure which, when proposed, many viewed with a degree of skepticism.

I recently had the chance to sit down and talk with Mr. Neil Henry, President of Financial Affairs, about the new student centre, the modular classrooms, and what new projects lie ahead for UPEI.

Joel Meggs: The Alumni Gym was being used for classroom space the last few years. Do the modular classrooms make up for that space?

Neil Henry: We set off to do a lot more than replace the alumni gym classrooms. And after a lot of discussion with the registrar's office, ... they basically identified where they were having trouble, and that was in the large classroom category. And that's why we built sixty seater classrooms.

Once they have a year's experience under their belt, if they say to us 'instead of a great big classroom, how about two smaller ones,' they can be split; we can put in a dividing wall. You don't get two thirty seaters, you get a twenty five and a thirty.

J.M.: Student enrollment has been increasing every year in the past few years. If this trend continues, will the modular classroom structure be enough to deal with an increasing student population?

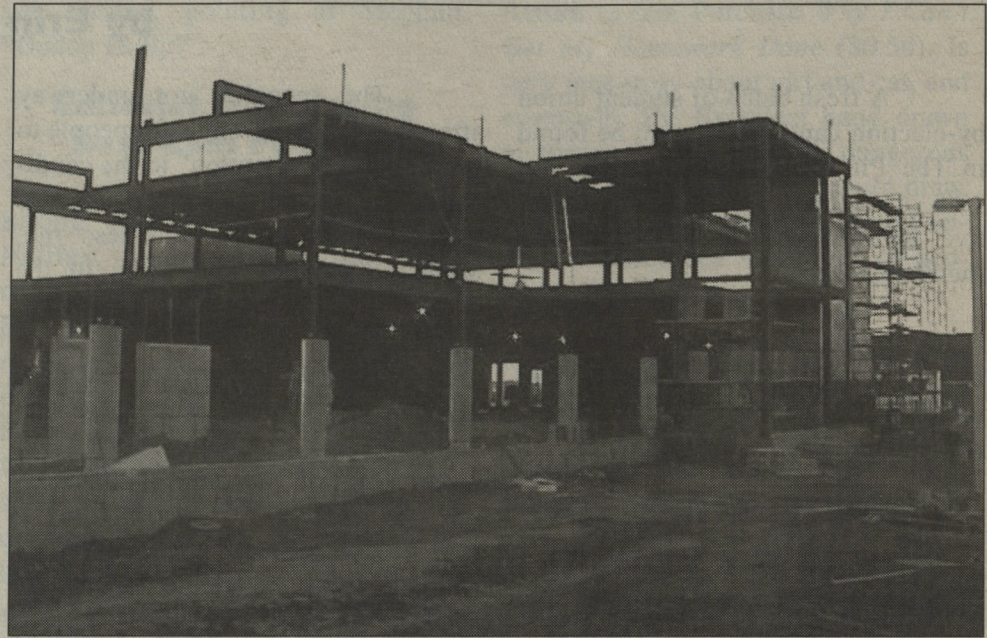
N.H.: If we have increases [in student enrollment] the way we have in the past two years, [the modular classroom solution] will only last so long.

We opted to go for this structure in part because we weren't sure of how many students we would be getting. The numbers suggest that we should actually be having a decrease in first year enrollments just because there aren't as many high school students graduating these days. But there is a higher percentage of those graduating that are coming in and that's what accounts for the increasing numbers.

Note: According to Mr. Henry, the university has told the province that it will need a new academic building in the next five years. The government hasn't responded either way yet, but the new building would definitely address any classroom space concerns well into the future.

J.M.: How is the Student Centre coming along now?

N.H.: It's been painful, for obvious reasons. Two obvious reasons, really:



The UPEI Student Centre under construction.

one, we're significantly over budget. When the tenders came in [in May of this year] they were came in significantly higher than expected. And then, of course, the fire – the fire cost us a lot of time. I hope that it will not have cost us much money; it was all insured.

J.M.: You had been building on the foundation of the Alumni Gym. Was any of that foundation salvageable?

N.H.: We only made a decision about three weeks ago to rip out the rest of the foundation.

We were partially demolishing the alumni gym, but it was a very solid structure, overbuilt by modern standards, and so we – part of the student union program called for a large, open, two-storied, multi-purpose space. The architect said 'we're about to tear down a perfectly good large, open, multi-storied, general purpose space in order to build a new one. Why don't we incorporate the old gym, which looks to us to be in very good shape, into the new building?'

And it will be interesting because some of those surfaces will show up inside the building. So that was the basis [for the decision]: mostly money and partially sentiment.

We were well on our way

when the fire broke out. We were well on our way to having the shell that we needed. It has taken us seven or eight weeks since the fire to get to the point where we could resume that piece of the building.

This is why when you go past the building, you see all the north end of the structure is going on great guns and they're still down on the foundation level [at the south end].

J.M.: You said that part of the reason for building on the Alumni Gym was for sentimental reasons; is any of that still salvageable?

N.H.: There are two or three small pieces left of the gym. There are a few bricks, there's some stuff from the façade – a sandstone shield that said Alumni Gym, 1950 – and there were two sandstone torches that were built into the façade.

We are actually reconstructing the gym ... not exactly the way it was, but largely. And the exposed surfaces will be kind of a memory of the old gym.

Note: Students looking for more information on the new Student Centre will likely find it at the extensive website that has been assembled at <http://www.upei.ca/guide/sucentre/>

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