



Concordia Expands



By Raymond Rendleman/The Portland Observer

TOP LEFT: Concordia University holds a plaza displaying the cornerstone of one of its first educational facilities built in 1907. The view to the north will change in the spring with the construction of a library and sports field. BOTTOM LEFT: Concordia University will expand two blocks north to Northeast Dekum Street with athletic fields and a library, replacing about 30 existing structures. Construction on the library will begin this spring. RIGHT: Concordia University President Charles Schlimpert (right) and Chief Financial Officer Dennis Stoecklin oversee a major expansion of the college's northeast Portland campus (photo by Raymond Rendleman/The Portland Observer)

Landmark becoming major university

College campuses tend to create a stir with expansion into adjoining properties, but not Concordia University, the 103-year-old institution at Northeast 27th Avenue and Holman Street.

As Concordia prepares to raze about 30 structures over a two-block area on its north side to make way for a new library and sports fields, there has been little controversy. All of the properties were purchased by the private Lutheran university voluntarily over several years.

Concordia officials argue that surrounding neighborhoods stay happy if higher education maintains a genuine sense of community partnership at all levels. In this case, that included the charge of finding ways to reach out to the African-American and Hispanic populations of the immediate area.

The outreach involved initiatives such as opening meeting and office space for the NAACP and the Black Parent Initiative, organizing a large corps of students and staff to volunteer regularly at nearby struggling schools, and finalizing the unveiling of a full-ride scholarship for a Jefferson

High School graduate, to be dedicated at the library groundbreaking April 10.

Community participation not only benefits public relations and the hundreds of neighbors that work with the school, according to Charles Schlimpert, Concordia's president for 25 years. Over the period that has made him the longest-sitting college president in Oregon, Schlimpert has refined the school's mission to recognize that local engagement is required to instill in students the ability, mindset and culture they need to transform the communities they love.

"It really isn't just change for change sake," Schlimpert told the Portland Observer. "It's part of a strategy, a vision that says we're going to be part of creating a great community, and the rest is history, as they say, because man, all of a sudden, it just took off."

The university had its share of financial difficulties that forced staff layoffs less than a decade ago. Now the school is riding a golden wave that has seen the addition of several new programs, including a nursing graduate program a couple years ago to be housed by the new library building.

Schlimpert maintains that hard-won progress is achieved through negotiation, and it's easier and safer in the end to break down any walls, construct buildings to face the neighborhood and welcome advice every step of the way.

"The first thing you have to do is listen," he says. "We could easily become an ivory tower. but that doesn't build community."

The school takes pride in having increased minority representation in its student body exceeding 1,600 to 20 percent and plans to increase that percentage as the enrollment reaches a final goal of 2,000.

Calling northeast Portland "the one quadrant in the city that's still fairly ripe for economic and social development," Schlimpert sees expansion as much more than just going across the street and buying a bunch of homes, alternatively hoping the community's ability to use the library and its built-in coffee shop will create more vibrancy.

The addition of lights and synthetic surface to the new sports field could have created conflict in planning meetings, but the selling point was the potential for expanding the hours the facility can be used for all types of activities.

The developments have won over influential African-American community members like Ron Williams of the Black Parent Initiative and former state Sen. Bob Boyer, who served on the college's board of regents.

"As Concordia expands, it's really become a university in the heart of the community," Boyer says.