

BTC replacing 'sinking' fisheries building at Maritime Heritage Park

By KIE RELYEA — THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

BELLINGHAM - A \$4 million project will replace Bellingham Technical College's worn-out fisheries building, which was built in 1947 to serve as a wastewater treatment plant.

"Right now, it's sinking," said Patricia McKeown, president of Bellingham Technical College, of structural problems in the existing fisheries building at Maritime Heritage Park. The walls and roof leak, too. The heating and electrical systems are outdated, and classroom chairs with wheels tend to roll to the other side of the room.

"It's really not an appropriate instructional site. It's not appropriate for anyone to be in this building," McKeown added. "It's a great thing that it's coming down." Construction of the two-story building at Maritime Heritage Park likely will begin in August.

The Perry Center for Fisheries and Aquaculture Sciences - the name for the new space - will give the school's program room to grow and a modern space. "It secures the future of this program," McKeown said. The new center will be 8,000 square feet, twice as large as the existing building but still within the same footprint. It will be built to last 50 years and to a LEED silver standard, so it will be more energy efficient. The college still needs to put the construction out for bid. The building will be completed and occupied by September 2013, with the college's fisheries and aquaculture program temporarily relocated until then.

BTC has run the fish hatchery at the mouth of Whatcom Creek in Maritime Heritage Park since 1978, after the former wastewater treatment plant was converted. Officials said when they took over the hatchery, there were no natural salmon runs in the creek. Today, it has multiple healthy runs of salmon species, according to BTC. "Having an urban salmon run in the middle of Bellingham is pretty unique," McKeown said.

The program's reach extends beyond Whatcom Creek. Its students have had a major impact on fisheries, shellfish and habitat restoration throughout the region, BTC officials said. The most visible sign may be the thousands of fishermen and families who line Whatcom Creek each fall to catch or see the returning salmon. The program and its students also operate the hatchery at Whatcom Falls Park.

BTC's graduates are employed as fish hatchery specialists, culturists for shellfish and fish, and as scientific aides for habitat restoration. The program, which has a list of students waiting to get in, has an 86 percent job placement rate. The program's students also plant and manage oysters, clams and mussels on Samish Bay each year, as well as raise nearly 2 million steelhead and salmon that are released into area creek and rivers.

The new building will be paid for with public and private dollars, including \$2 million from the state and \$400,000 from the Whatcom County Economic Development Investment program. Other sources are Rotary Club of Bellingham, Taylor Shellfish and Seattle Shellfish, BTC staff and faculty, as well as up to \$500,000 from the college's Board of Trustees. "It's a broad group of people who are supporting the project," McKeown said.



A private donation also came from Chuck Bundrant, chairman of Seattle-based Trident Seafoods, which has a processing plant in Bellingham. Bundrant gave \$250,000 and asked that the center be named for Edd and Virginia Perry. "It's exciting to have that kind of contribution," McKeown said. Edd Perry, Bundrant's friend, had been the owner of San Juan Seafoods in Bellingham, and the two have worked together for many years. "Edd and Virginia Perry are just absolutely salt of the earth, delightful people. For them to be honored in this way, it's not only touching but it's the right thing to do," McKeown said. Having Edd Perry's name on the center honors his contributions to both companies, as well as the fishing industry in Whatcom County and the Northwest, McKeown said.

The new center will have many windows on the first floor, on the side that faces Maritime Heritage Park. That will allow the public to look in and see what's happening in the hatchery and shellfish lab, according to McKeown. She also hopes that the new site will allow for salmon-related events for the community, to bring attention to salmon or shellfish. "Right now, you don't have any space down there that that could even happen," McKeown said.

Meanwhile, fundraising continues for the remainder. Among those helping to raise money for the center is Debbie Granger, a longtime fisher, former career counselor at Squalicum and Bellingham high schools, and current manager of an aquaculture research program at the University of Washington. "This is a significant way to preserve and enhance our precious marine and fisheries and aquaculture resources," said Granger, a Bellingham resident. She added: "It's been so heart-warming, the interest and the generous outpouring," Granger added. "It's not any one person ... it's lots of people realizing the importance of this program."

TO HELP

Bellingham Technical College is still raising money toward the \$4 million cost of the project to build the Perry Center for Fisheries and Aquaculture Sciences.

To learn more and to donate, go online to www.btc.ctc.edu.