

Significant Upgrades to Petaluma & Public Safety Training Center Planned, Thanks to Measure H Bond Funds

By Bob Padecky

Confusing and crowded: these are two words that currently describe the conditions at SRJC's Petaluma Campus and the college's Public Safety Training Center in Windsor. These are two conditions that, after funded with bond money from Measure H, will go the way of the rotary telephone, poof, as if they never existed.

Confusing? Think of approaching the Petaluma campus as if you're entering a maze. "It is challenging for students to find out where they need to go," said Dr. Catherine Williams, dean of instruction and enrollment management. "When we have our welcome center open, we literally have a person standing to direct people where to go."

Crowded? Think of approaching Windsor's Training Center as if you are entering a stuffed phone booth.

"I've turned away students because we do not have the space for training," said April Chapman, dean of public safety, Director of the Public Safety Training Center. "It's a critical need. We actually have to rent space from the airport."

In Petaluma the need for clarity involves more than just ease of entry (there are multiple entrances). They need to make it clear for the students that one location contains all student services.

"We have instruction and student services located in the same building," Williams said. "They should be apart."

It's not just for clarity and convenience. It's adapting to the changing demographic of Sonoma County.

"Petaluma isn't aging quite like the rest of the county," said Maggie Fishman, SRJC Board of Trustees President,

Dr. Williams explained, "Windsor and Petaluma are the two cities (in Sonoma County) that are growing from kindergarten through 12th grade. We have students who live in Cloverdale who choose to take their classes here and drive past Santa Rosa."

The ultimate goal is to change the perception of the Petaluma campus, that it's not a distant satellite circling the Santa Rosa campus. The numbers certainly bear that out. If the Petaluma campus were a college unto itself, it would have a larger student enrollment than 20 of the 113 California community colleges. The Petaluma campus produces more full-time equivalent students than 22 of those colleges.

“We want to make this a destination campus,” Williams said, “where people come and stay and not just attend classes and leave.”

To that end, and what may confound educators, video games will be used to accomplish that goal. A total of 110 students are signed up for the campus’ video game club. It’s the largest organization on campus.

“You might think that’s not a great educational tool,” Williams said. “But it keeps kids on campus between classes. We installed a video game screen last year and it’s been a huge success.”

The plan is to make the bookstore the video gaming room, with the entire building becoming a student services engagement area. The dining room commons will become the bookstore. All the ideas have a single intention: Create a student community at the Petaluma campus, not simply a somewhat-visited rest stop on their way to a four-year college.

“I was initially a little skeptical (about the emphasis on the video game room),” Fishman said. “But I went to their opening day last year. It was amazing on so many levels. It kept the students engaged. And it was the diversity of the crowd. And they took that companionship outside the room. Now I’m a fan, an advocate.”

Dr. Williams would like to see her students stay on campus for more than just computer games. An expansion of the chemistry lab facilities will help. Currently only one flume is available for chemistry. Four are needed, she said, with the benefits far-reaching. Students wanting to transfer to a four-year school wouldn’t have to drive to Santa Rosa to take some classes.

“What you would have is something you don’t see – local students not having to drive to take science classes,” Dr. Williams said. “They could complete their (transfer) education here. If we are able to offer more science classes we can also offer a higher level of math classes. Now, bottlenecks occur. And driving back and forth between classes makes life more complicated.

“We’re also concerned about students who can’t afford transportation who live locally. It’s an access and equity issue. We hear that from students the time. We did a student survey, asking them what they would like to see in Petaluma, and science classes always rise to the top.”

In Windsor the issue is different but just as complex. Training firefighters, paramedics, park rangers, prison guards and law enforcement demands a unique facility.

“Students don’t go to a classroom and sit there for eight hours,” Chapman said. “They have to move around. The firearm ranges, fire towers, racecourses, scenario

village, a classroom, all of them are in use. We average between 6,000-8,500 students a year and they are here anywhere from a couple months to 24 months.

“The training center was completed in 2002. Three years later they already identified it as inadequate in space. The project (to be funded by Measure H) was designed 11 years ago.”

One of just five regional centers in California, the Windsor facility serves Northern California. It has developed such a reputation that students come from as far north as Eureka and as far south as Los Angeles.

“People like the results we have,” Chapman said. But those results come at a price: the facility runs seven days a week, stays open to 10 p.m. and, still, that doesn’t answer all of the need. As an example, 18 students were turned away from a January police academy class. Given the critical service the Windsor facility provides, Chapman feels the requests are not extravagant.

“We have one multi-purpose room,” Chapman said. “We are planning for a second multi room right next to it. Our student lounge is also a computer lab. People are trying to eat, cook and use the computer. We want to enlarge the building. Our firing range has only 15 lanes and on any given day six of our academies want to use it. That’s one of the reasons we are here to 10 o’clock at night (because of an environmental impact report).

“Right now the water we use in fire training goes down the drain. We are looking for reclaimed water to use the same water all the time. “

A new emphasis on cultural diversity from the sheriff’s department has left Chapman scrambling and frustrated. “New training on body cams, new training on lethal, are now being required,” Chapman said, “but when I have to say I can’t get you in for six months or you have to come at 2 o’clock Sunday afternoon that’s not ideal.”

The Windsor facility provides a certificate education that, while not leading to a college degree, does prepare a student for a career not only satisfying but essential.

“We don’t say ‘vocational training’ anymore,” Fishman said. “We say ‘career technical education’. Some kids with a waste water treatment plant certificate get better jobs than kids with four years of college. They are training for real jobs in a real economy. There are 160 certificate programs at SRJC.”

Dr. Williams, Fishman and Chapman all echoed the same sentiment: In the ever-changing and competitive environment all institutions of higher learning face, to improve and enhance the student experience is not just desirable, it’s a necessity. Both campuses – while offering much different curriculum – have that in common.