

Cal Poly Pomona wants to raze iconic but seismically unstable building

Erica Perez, California Watch, 9-20-10

The California State University Board of Trustees will consider a proposal this week that would allow Cal Poly Pomona to raze an iconic but seismically unsafe building on campus and build a new, \$78 million replacement.

Anyone who has visited Cal Poly Pomona in the last decade has probably seen the Classroom Laboratory Administration building. Its triangular "skyroom" atop the eight-story tower is visible from the freeway, a sort of visual representation of the university. As the name suggests, the building houses a mix of classrooms, labs and faculty and staff spaces. Altogether, the building has stations or seats for more than 1,700 people.

The building's signature appearance was the result of an international design competition launched by the university. It ended up costing about \$24 million, making it the most expensive building CSU had ever erected at that time.

But since its completion in 1993, it has been plagued with structural flaws. In a construction defect lawsuit filed against the contractors, CSU officials said the builders had installed inadequate weather protection systems – causing the building to leak water through the windows – improperly secured some construction elements, used plaster alternatives it knew to be unsuitable, and more.

Later, a geological survey by the university revealed the building was one of several on the campus that straddled the San Jose fault, which has not been identified as an active fault by the California Geological Survey but poses a hazard nonetheless.

The CSU Board of Trustees won a \$13.3 million out-of-court settlement in 2005, according to the university's financial statements.

Meanwhile, the CSU's Seismic Review Board recommended that the building be placed on Priority List 1 for seismic retrofit – a designation that is reserved for buildings considered collapse risks in a major earthquake, as California Watch reported earlier this year. Despite this rating, the university says the building is safe to occupy. They point out that the building performed well during the magnitude 5.4 Chino Hills earthquake in 2008.

Originally, the university had planned to repair the problem structure, but cost estimates for that work had continued to balloon, with the most recent estimate hitting \$80 million. That price tag would include roughly \$15 million to relocate the people inside the building during construction. A seismic upgrade would require taking out the drywall and reinforcing the building from the inside, said Mike Sylvester, associate vice president for facilities planning and management for Cal Poly Pomona.

Several weeks ago, Cal Poly Pomona President Michael Ortiz met with CSU Chancellor Charles Reed and other campus and system officials to talk about the plans for the building, and together they decided that tearing it down was the best way to go. Replacing the building would cost about the same as it would to fix it, plus they could locate it away from the San Jose fault and make it more energy-efficient, Sylvester said.

"Is it an icon? In some people's eyes, yeah, it's an icon," Sylvester said. "Our president said it best – the safety of our faculty, staff and students is more important."

The new building won't be quite as big, however. While the CLA has about 200,000 gross square feet, the new structure would have about 138,000. Campus officials say they'll handle the shrinkage using new space in the forthcoming College of Business Administration complex.

Now there's the question of how the CSU system will pay for the new building. The settlement money from the lawsuit can't be touched for anything but repairs or debt service on the existing building, CSU spokesman Michael Uhlenkamp said. He didn't have information Friday on how much debt remains on that project.

The CSU would seek lease revenue bonds financing to pay for the new building in 2011-12, but that request would still need approval from the state legislature and the governor. Under the proposal that goes before trustees Tuesday, the Pomona project would move up the CSU's priority list. Among multimillion dollar projects, it would be first.