Thomas Jefferson School of Law construction ahead of schedule

By CARLOS RICO, The Daily Transcript
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Even with a rainy winter and the discovery of prehistoric fossils that stopped construction, the new Thomas Jefferson School of Law campus moves ahead of schedule and will be completed less than a year from now.

“The contract says the campus has to be turned over (from contractor to school) by Jan. 9, 2011,” said Dean Rudy Hasl. “Now it’s looking like it will be turned over around the beginning of December.”

Hasl attributes the slightly ahead of scheduled project to a combination of including weather-related delays in the contract and the fact that there have been little or no major construction mishaps.

As of now, the $68.25 million downtown campus is approximately 60 percent complete, with drywall and electrical work being done.

Recently, a spiral-shaped staircase was delivered to the jobsite. The 60-foot curving staircase, which is made of stainless steel and glass panels, will start in the lobby and connect the second and third floors of the campus.

Hasl added that once the eight-story structure is completely enclosed and the scaffolding is removed, which was scheduled to happen in late April, most of the interior work will begin.

“In the fall a lot of the new equipment for the campus will be moved in, so by December some of the existing materials that will be moved from the current facility in Old Town can be placed accordingly,” Hasl said.

Once the new downtown campus officially opens its doors for the new semester in mid-June, it will be an 177,000-square-foot school featuring a two-level library with surrounding balconies; a three-level underground parking structure; and ground-floor space for a law clinic, cafeteria, bookstore and retail store that will be open to the public.

The school is being built to achieve LEED Gold certification standards from the U.S. Green Building Council, which means it will have energy-efficient amenities such as automatic ceiling light sensors and heat reflective glass windows, along with water-saving tactics like waterless urinals. The building will also be made with materials made from recycled content.

Also, some of the 500,000-year-old mammoth fossils found during excavation of the site will be integrated into the flooring of the main entrance of the new campus.

Construction is being led by Bovis Lend Lease Inc. and the design work was the collaborative idea of S2 Architecture and school officials.

The entire Thomas Jefferson School of Law staff will completely vacate its current campus on May 30, 2011 when their lease ends. The school sold the three Old Town buildings in 2008 and used this money for construction of the new downtown campus in the East Village.

The decision to move from Old Town to the East Village, Hasl said, was based on a desire to take advantage of all the opportunities downtown San Diego offers.

“The main legal community is located in downtown,” he explained. “Law firms and the courts are all down here.

“Downtown is also an area that offers better access via public transportation to our students and faculty by being located near the trolley on Island and 11th (Avenue).”

Hasl also said because of the new campus in the East Village, the school would now be able to offer student housing.

“We want to fuse our students into the community,” he said, adding that the school has just agreed to lease 150 units for the fall semester and that the school is working with a developer to build its own student housing complex. “Our goal is to have 400 to 450 units.”

Currently, 850 students attend the 41-year-old school and Hasl said he expects it to increase by 75 people each year until it reaches the 1,025-space limit of the new campus.

“We have already starting the hiring process for new faculty” to accommodate the growing student body, he said. The school will have 40 full-time teachers.

Hasl also commented that tuition would still go up at the current gradual rate of 5 to 7 percent each year. Tuition is currently $38,000 a year.