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Building Toward a New Future

The state of the new headquarters



It's a clear, sunny weekday in May. A man wearing a hardhat shaped like a Stetson materializes from a construction site. His name is Rodney Freeman, and he is a member of The Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles' Real Estate & Construction Division. He is also on the committee supervising the biggest enterprise

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ever undertaken by L.A.'s Jewish Federation - the refurbishing of the nonprofit organization's 6505 Wilshire Blvd. headquarters.

At roughly \$20 million, Freeman calls the new building "a phenomenal investment." For many weeks, he and the planning committee, headed by capital campaign co-chairs Lionel Bell and Ed Sanders (both past Federation presidents) have been overseeing what is more of a reconstruction than remodeling. "The old building was in great disrepair," Bell said. The committee spent three months of planning and design before embarking on the building's 12-month construction calendar, set to wind down by summer's end.

Serving as docent on this May day, Freeman leads a hardhat-wearing crew of core Federation execs - president John Fishel, co-chairmen Bell and Sanders, and capital campaign director Judith Fischer - on a private tour of the yet-unfinished edifice. Even as the group proceeded, communication lines were being installed, and interior systems such as electrical, heating and ventilation were being connected. Almost 300 construction workers are on the site on any given day.

By the time the dust settles in early September, Bell said, the building will boast "state-of-the-art communications systems - video conferencing, computer networking." The current plan is for Federation staffers to move in on Sept. 4, with beneficiary agencies taking up residence by Sept. 15. And so far, according to Freeman, 6505's reconstruction is right on schedule.

Originally built in the late 1950s, 6505 Wilshire Blvd. became the Federation's headquarters during Sanders' early 1970s presidency.

"We were located at 590 North Vermont," recalls

the former Federation head. "It had numerous disadvantages. Freeways were not a factor in the early days. It would take three or four hours out of your day just to assemble at the old place. There were a lot of people who wouldn't come to meetings. And even in those days, that neighborhood was not a place where people wanted to go." Despite naysayers, Sanders persisted in pushing for a new building, and the Federation purchased 6505 for \$2.7 million. Sanders recalls his trepidation when the Federation, in an effort to raise \$2.5 million, decided to approach 100 people and solicit \$25,000 from each.

"After the building opened and everyone saw it, we were oversubscribed," Sanders said with a chuckle. An additional \$6 million was raised much later to remodel the building. Then came the 1994 Northridge quake, which caused internal structural damage.

"Because of the earthquake, the mandate was that we shouldn't occupy that building," recalls Bell. As a result, the Wilshire/San Vicente location has been substantially retrofitted with a two-and-a-half-foot concrete and steel foundation reinforcement extending around the perimeter of the building. From the get-go, the Federation's interim 5700 headquarters was meant to be just that: transitional office space. The Federation signed a five-year lease with the intent of moving into a new building by 2000. Bell and company long mulled over ideas of either buying a building or buying land on the Westside before concluding, Bell said, that "it was best to return to 6505 after all."

Several key motivations had a hand in that decision. One was the difficulty The Federation experienced in finding an acceptable building in West L.A. that was within their budget. Sanders

explains another: "We'd lose at least a couple of million dollars from FEMA because we didn't repair."

The capital campaign for 6505's refurbishing was launched during Lionel Bell's recent administration. Freeman credits Bell for having the foresight to "open up generational lines" in the capital campaign, encouraging people of disparate generations to contribute.

He promises that the new and improved 6505 will achieve a "significant reduction in overall operating costs." A lot of space was created by knocking out old staircases, for example. By putting the mechanical rooms on the roof, Freeman says, the building gained nearly 9,000 sq. ft. And some ceiling consolidation has given offices nine-foot instead of eight-foot ceilings. Overall, the building has increased its square footage from 102,000 to 136,000 square feet to better accommodate its 30 tenants.

Federation employees and visitors will surely benefit from the extra space and ample window design, which will allow for a lot more natural light than the building used to admit. Jerusalem stone will run down the length of the building's Wilshire Boulevard exterior. And Freeman points out that the new building will meet American Disabilities Act standards and is the first construction project that meets the structural standards of the city's revamped 1997 building code. The reconstruction also updates the building's emergency and security functions.

Space in the building has already been earmarked for executive suites and agencies. Most of 6505's 12 floors will house Federation agencies and affiliates, with the 11th floor containing the Federation's executive offices. The lobby level will include a northwest corner

executive board room that is 30 percent bigger than its older counterpart. The rest of that floor will be devoted largely to family, housing the Zimmer Discovery Children's Museum of Jewish Community Centers and a children's library.

Bell said that when 6505 reopens, it will not only benefit the roughly 350 employees that will move into the building but will serve the entire community in more ways than ever before. A public opening is tentatively scheduled for December. And while more than \$17 million has been amassed so far, Campaign 2000 will continue to raise big money with naming opportunities throughout 6505. Early in 2001, the Federation's capital campaign will shift, branching out with a community-wide campaign to solicit contributions for its completion and maintenance. "The new building makes a very strong statement of the health and well-being of the local Jewish community," Bell said.

Sanders seconds that notion, delighted to be championing 6505 again. "I'm doing this again because I'm emotionally attached to it," Sanders said. "It was a great move in those days, and I was proud to lead the march. Now I'm proud to play a role and lead the march again."
