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David Brower Center in Berkeley nearing completion

By Kristin Bender
Oakland Tribune
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BERKELEY — Berkeley Mayor Tom Bates once called the David Brower Center project one of the most complicated in the city's history.

Seven years of planning and negotiations. Thousands of hours of work by professionals and community members. Skyrocketing project costs. Community complaints. Challenging financial schemes with the adjoining affordable housing complex.

You get the idea.

But now the \$30 million project is just 10 months and \$2.5 million away from completion.

"It's just exciting to see it really happening," Berkeley writer Ken Brower said about the complex named in honor of his father. "My son and I made a detour to drive by it (last week) and it's impressive to see that it's really happening. For all the bureaucratic hoops it ran through in the beginning, when it finally got going it just really shot up."

Although Bates said the financing components for Oxford Plaza — the retail and housing portion of the overall Allston Way project — caused "my hair to go white," the hurdles seem to be over.

"It's going to be a major showpiece for the city," he said.

Brower Center Executive Director Amy Tobin said there will be at least eight more months before the construction workers finish up and the scaffolding comes down. "Construction is supposed to end by next February, but a building like this has to be fine-tuned because it has so many new technologies," she said. "We are planning to

open in May."

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The building will be in line with Brower's beliefs because it will be green from the ground up, with a photovoltaic roof, green architecture, earth-friendly retailers and 50,000 square feet of office space for nonprofit groups such as International Rivers, the Center for Ecoliteracy, the Earth Island Institute and others, Tobin said.

Brower was the first executive director of the Sierra Club and a leader in campaigns to establish 10 new national parks. He also founded the League of Conservation Voters, Friends of the Earth and Earth Island Institute. He died in 2000 at 88.

A walk through the downtown

Berkeley construction site now is no different from strolling through any other construction site. Lots of men in hard hats. Lots of noise. Bundles of materials laying around.

But when finished, the four-story building will be anything but ordinary, Tobin said.

In the grand atrium there will be a desk made from reclaimed wood. The building will have a flat panel display that will show visitors — at any give time — just how much water and electricity is being used in the building. About 40 percent of the building will be made from recycled materials.

"In every choice we make we are thinking about where it came from, what it's made of and how long it will last," Tobin said.

The center will include a restaurant serving organic fare and a more casual cafe with to-go food.

"They want to make it the brunch spot for Berkeley," Tobin said. There will be an art gallery that will feature at least three exhibits a year along with film screenings and author appearances, a 180-seat auditorium, office space and conference rooms.

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A courtyard will allow tenants to collaborate on environmental projects, and long community tables in the eatery will encourage interaction among regulars and visitors.

Another part of the project on the same parcel is Oxford Plaza, which will have 97 affordable housing units and 8,000 square feet of ground-floor retail space. That \$41 million project is coming in on budget, said Dan Sawislak, executive director of Berkeley-based Resources for Community Development, which is overseeing the housing.

There will also be 99 parking spaces built underground, replacing the current aboveground lot that is now closed. That lot will serve the public, not those who live at the affordable housing project.

Through the years, there have been opponents — as there are with almost everything that is planned or built in Berkeley — who have argued against everything from the plans for affordable housing to excessive parking to the size of the complex. There have also been financial challenges.

"The main time when (the financing component) was an issue was end of 2006 when there was a question as to whether we would be able to put the financing together," Sawislak said. "We've been able to tighten up construction and make sure we had all the money we need to build the project. Since then, we've been going along very well."

He said the affordable housing should be open by February. "It will be for working families and people who work in downtown Berkeley. Getting into one of the rental units will be based on income level, family size and median incomes," Sawislak said.

The David Brower Center memorializes a legacy that started in Berkeley, where Brower was born. He attended Berkeley High School and UC Berkeley, where he studied entomology before dropping out to become a mountaineer.

In 1952, Brower was named executive director of the Sierra Club, which under his leadership grew from 7,000 members to more than 70,000 by the 1960s, according to published reports on his life. He served in that role until 1969. Brower also founded Friends of the Earth, the largest environmental group in the world, edited some 50 books, and was three times nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

He led campaigns to establish 10 new national parks, including Point Reyes, the North Cascades and the Redwoods. There is also an effort under way to name a mountain peak after Brower, his son Ken Brower said.

Tobin said the center is expected to receive the LEED (the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design program) platinum certification. It would be the first LEED Platinum building in Berkeley and one of the fewer than 10 such buildings in Northern California. This is important, Bates said, because Berkeley has a mandate to reduce emissions by 80 percent by 2050.

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