Round Three Ahead for New Building Campaign

By Dean N. William Hines

For the second straight year, efforts to obtain state funding for the new law building came agonizingly close to success before failing in the waning minutes of this spring’s legislative session. A supplemental bonding bill to provide $23.3 million for a new law building cleared the Senate by a 31-18 margin and appeared headed for final passage before it became ensnarled in eleventh hour parliamentary maneuvering that prevented the bill from even reaching the floor of the House for a vote. Had supporters of the Law School project successfully navigated the political shoals that inevitably arise during the Legislature’s frantic final hours, our best count indicated that 65 of the 100 House members would have voted for the Law School building.

As with athletic contests and judicial decisions, losing the close ones hurts the most, and this close loss was a painful one indeed. Even in retrospect, it is hard to believe that a project that had the strong support of the organized Bar, of the Governor, of the legislative leadership of both parties, and even the congressional delegation did not gain final approval. Yet the heartbreaking fact is that funding for construction of the sorely needed new building is still at least a year away, and we are left to reorganize and start over again with a new governor and a new General Assembly to be elected in the fall. Tempting as it is to do otherwise, however, we must forego recriminations about who should bear responsibility for the disappointing setback. Instead we should first pause to marvel at the tremendous outpouring of support our alumni and other friends were able to generate for the new building. After all, the 1981 legislature had just approved $58 million in such bonds very begrudgingly, custom was against funding new capital projects in the second year of the biennium, and the Iowa economy was deteriorating steadily. The project received a major boost, however, when Governor Ray specifically endorsed it in his January budget message. From that point on a vigorous state-wide grassroots effort carried the project steadily forward through the legislative process. Favorable votes were achieved by wide margins in the Joint Committee on Educational Appropriations, the Senate Appropriations Committee, and on the Senate floor. Further, more than enough votes were pre-committed for approval by the House Appropriations Committee and for final passage on the House floor, but unfortunately these votes were never cast. Despite strong pressure from many quarters, the House Appropriations Committee could not be convened to take up the Law School measure, and its fate was sealed by this highly controversial stalemate.

The failure to win funding for the new building was a bitter pill, not only to those who fought so hard for its passage in Des Moines, but also to the literally hundreds of supporters who worked diligently with their local legislators to deliver the favorable margins which were recorded each time a vote was taken on the project. Ignoring for the moment the disappointing outcome, the most gratifying feature of the whole spring legislative campaign was the breadth and persistence of the political support the Law School and the University were able to enlist for the new building project. Alumni, lawyers, and other friends of the School in every corner of Iowa responded to the calls for help with enthusiasm and effectiveness rarely witnessed in state politics. Statehouse observers were continually amazed at the votes the Law School project attracted as it wound its way through the Legislature. Time and again legislators traditionally opposed to such projects cast affirmative votes for the Law School building. Nearly always the explanation for these surprising votes was to be Looking back, veteran political observers thought the Law School cause hopeless last fall when the Board of Regents agreed to seek authorization from the 1982 legislature to issue additional bonds to finance a new

Bulldozer digging to clear land for new law building construction.
found back in the legislators' home district where an influential group of constituents had exercised their persuasive powers in favor of the Law School's cause. For us in Iowa City, it took a lot of the sting out of a painful setback to find out that so many people around Iowa care strongly about their Law School and are willing to wield their political clout on our behalf. Without the help of this large group of people too numerous to name, our legislative effort this year would never have gotten off the ground; it is a tribute to their loyalty and perseverance that we overcame so many obstacles to reach the very threshold of success before being thwarted by wild-card factors which none of us could foresee or control.

Shortly after the House adjourned without voting on the Law School project, there was considerable talk in legislative circles to the effect that the Law School now owed a new building. Likewise several journalists predicted in print that the Law School project was sure to win approval in 1983. We sincerely hope this speculation proves correct, but if this year's misadventure taught us any lesson, it is that there are no sure things in Des Moines. To paraphrase Will Rodgers, "Nothing is certain when the Legislature is in session." With continued support of the level we received this year, however, we should be able to build upon our near success and see to it that the third time truly is the charm for winning state funding for a desperately needed new law building.

In the meantime, everything possible is being done by the University and the Board of Regents to maintain momentum on the law building project. The 3½ acre Varsity Heights site is now cleared and ready to receive new construction. The planning contract with architect Gunnar Bickerts has been extended and funded fully to allow completion of all the architectural design work. Bickerts and his associates are scheduled to finish the final details of the planning by January 1983, at which point the building will be fully designed and ready for the letting of bids and the execution of construction contracts. If the long-awaited funding is approved on the anticipated timetable, construction would start promptly in the summer of 1983, and the Law College would open the 1985-86 academic year in a beautiful new home. Alumni and other supporters of the Law School should keep their fingers crossed and stay in close communication with their local legislators as we await next spring's legislative campaign.

Postscript:

On August 9, 1982 the ABA's Accreditation Committee advised the University that if funding for the new law building is not obtained by July 1, 1983, a special site visit team will be appointed to review the status of the Law College's facilities with respect to continuing its accreditation.