

State OKs \$23M NIU sustainability center; completion slated for 2026



An aerial drone image of NIU in DeKalb is seen May 13, 2021. Shaw Local News Network file photo

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DeKALB –Almost four years after the project was announced, designs for a \$23 million sustainability center at Northern Illinois University have received the go-ahead from the state of Illinois.

According to a Wednesday announcement from the university, approval on the design phase for NIU’s Northern Illinois Center for Community Sustainability in DeKalb means the project is effectively green lit to move forward.

The Illinois Capital Development Board is now accepting bids from engineering and architectural firms for the planning phase of the project, according to its website, with a projected goal to select a contractor by Oct. 11.

The sustainability center was announced in October 2018. The announcement also marked NIU’s entry into the Illinois Innovation Network, a conglomerate of state-funded research centers under development meant to drive statewide economic growth and address global issues, such as climate change.

“The Illinois Innovation Network exists to ensure the needs and ideas of every community are represented in the economy of the future, and I’m

proud to dedicate \$15 million in state funding to bring this hub for groundbreaking research to DeKalb,” Gov. JB Pritzker said in a news release. “The establishment of NIU’s Center for Community Sustainability represents a climate advancement for our whole state, and I’m proud to greenlight its development.”

The Illinois Innovation Network supports interdisciplinary research, policy development and public-private partnerships to stimulate economic development and job creation, according to the release.

University officials have touted the Northern Illinois Center for Community Sustainability as a way to attract global researchers to come together and address water resources, environmental change and food systems while promoting science-based policies and community practices.

In the release, NIU President Lisa Freeman thanked Pritzker’s administration and state legislators for their help pushing the project forward.

“NIU is a perfect fit for this new center because our distinctive peri-urban geography positions us to understand the stresses among cities, suburbs and farmlands and create sustainable solutions to span the gaps,” Freeman said. “The new center will address statewide sustainability issues, drive economic opportunity and spur public-private partnerships and investment. NICCS will also create opportunities for NIU faculty members to expand their research related to food systems, water resources and environmental change, and educate the next generation of environmental scientists and stewards.”

The roughly 30,000-square-foot facility will put down roots on the university’s west campus, northwest of the NIU Convocation Center in DeKalb.

More than half of the new building’s cost, or \$15 million, will be funded through a portion of the \$500 million state money slated for the innovation network in 2018. According to the release, NIU anticipates additional funding to come through private investment and donations.

The facility is expected to come online in 2026. Construction could begin in 2023, according to the release.

Preliminary concept designs plan for a building with classrooms, offices, laboratories, an atrium and conference spaces. Two wings are planned for research and external tenants.

“In keeping with the entrepreneurial spirit of the Illinois Innovation Network, we aim to create a world-class destination for experts, university

faculty, graduate and undergraduate students, government and business leaders, and citizens working to enhance sustainability in their communities,” said Gerald C. Blazey, NIU vice president for research and innovation partnerships.

Blazey also serves as chairman of the Illinois Innovation Network Council.

The center will work to develop new sustainable water systems for agriculture, industry and personal consumption.

Other research will be conducted on biodiversity, ecosystem restoration, environmental maintenance, natural disasters, climate change and responses to extreme climate events.

The center will also research new methods of food production, in partnership with researchers across the world.

The university already has recruited more faculty to conduct research and hold lecture series.

NIU officials said they expect the center to be a boon for faculty and students also, bolstering already existing research that faculty have been doing for years.

Since the center was first announced, NIU faculty have won grants from the Illinois Innovation Network and federal sources to conduct research on American prairie restoration, soil microbes, turning trash into usable products, exploring urban-rural connections and enhancing agricultural practices, the release states.

NIU also notes a strong interest in sustainability studies among students, including its more than 100 current students pursuing bachelor’s degrees in environmental studies. According to the release, many hundreds more NIU students are pursuing degrees in areas ranging from meteorology and geology to engineering and law where sustainability issues are at the forefront.

NIU meteorology professor Victor Gensini said sustainability is vital to his line of work, including severe weather and long-range forecasting.

Such research can aid building structures to better withstand extreme weather events – which are becoming more prevalent as climate change impacts existing weather and seasonal patterns.

Gensini also is a member of NIU’s Weather, Climate and Society Research

Group, which studies how weather and climate extremes impact humans and the economy.

“The sustainability issues we are tackling today are complex and require expertise from many different disciplines,” he said. “It’s exciting to know that the new Northern Illinois Center for Community Sustainability will be at the forefront of collaborations on sustainability solutions for decades to come.”