

RALEIGH

Construction Begins Soon on New Convention Center

Now that the disputes, editorials and discussions are out of the way, the much-debated Raleigh Convention Center is finally in the hands of designers, architects, and builders.

Skansa USA, Barnhill Contracting Co., and O'Brien/Akins, Clearscapes and Atlanta-based TVS, a national convention center design firm, must now go from the schematic drawings that illustrate what the building will look like to actually creating it. So, they're busy fulfilling an \$870,400 contract for pre-design and pre-construction services.

"I think the architects did a great job of merging concepts of traditional versus iconic looks," says Margaret Mullen, president and CEO of the Downtown Raleigh Alliance. "A building this size — a two-story building tall as a ten-story building that takes up an entire block — can't look too old."

Mullen says she thinks the community will be thrilled with the view from the enormous ballroom that tops the building. "I think the ballroom will be the part the community uses the most," she adds.

Kenneth Luker, a senior architect with O'Brien/Atkins, the firm responsible for much of the look of Research Triangle Park, says that while the completed building may not look as traditional as the State Capitol and other Raleigh historic buildings, "it will incorporate similar materials and it will have a stately quality. It's about attitude. But the scale and room sizes are unlike anything traditional architecture ever addressed."

Andy Whiteley, senior vice president



Construction on the new convention center is expected to start in April.



Architect's drawing shows the "stately" look of the new Raleigh Convention Center.

of Skansa USA, says that now they're past "fishing for ideas everyone liked, we're starting on the detailed design."

Luker explains that means going from the schematic drawings to what architects call "design development. It's getting down to the nitty-gritty of how to make it happen. How to make this wall work and this roof form. The schematics get highly refined." Design development should conclude by March.

"Next comes the construction document phase," Luker explains. "That's when we provide detailed specifications on materials and say this has to be exactly four inches wide and ten inches long and so on."

The designers face a number of challenges, Luker notes, such as matching budget limitations to city aspirations and meeting building codes. One problem they must address, for instance: how to move 10,000 people up from the exhibit space and 2,400 people down from the ballroom if both are in use during an emergency?

The new Convention Center is one of five parts of the Raleigh "Livable Streets Plan," that also includes reinvigorating Fayetteville Street, improving the pedestrian environment, reforming regulations to make it easier to do business downtown, and taking a one-stop approach to downtown management.

Excavation and shoring of the foundation starts in February. Construction of the building itself is slated to start by April and city planners project it will host 375,000 visitors a year when it opens in 2007.

—Allan Maurer