

Baker helps celebrate opening of campus center

HCC completes \$43.5M renovation

BY JIM KINNEY

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Gov. Charlie Baker recalled the last time he toured the Campus Center at Holyoke Community College and the way it was before a two-year, \$43.5 million rehab he was called on to help celebrate with a ribbon cutting yesterday.

“This is breathtaking,” Baker said, according to a transcript of the event provided by the college. “The amount of light and open space it has now that it didn’t have before and the areas for collaborative thinking and engaging it didn’t have before is astonishing. It speaks to the way this campus can serve its students as well as its faculty and administrators.”

The school described it as a “top-to-bottom” renovation and expansion of the 66,000-square-foot building.

The Campus Center follows other building and expansion projects, including the new HCC MGM Culinary Arts Institute in the Cubit Building, which opened in 2018, and its Center of Health Education, which opened in 2015.

Visitors on the tour yesterday got a chance to sample food prepared by HCC Dining Services/Aramark; listen to live music from an HCC student quartet; play dominoes with students in



Gov. Charlie Baker greets students during his tour at Holyoke Community College’s Campus Center yesterday afternoon. More photos at MassLive.com. (HOANG ‘LEON’ NGUYEN / THE REPUBLICAN)

El Centro, which is home to HCC’s Multicultural Academic Services program; watch eSports students in action on a virtual playing field; buy HCC gear in the College Store; and visit HCC’s Student Engagement area to talk to students representing clubs and other campus activities.

The Campus Center first opened in 1978 and had been plagued by leaks and water damage for decades, according to HCC. The college closed it for reconstruction in 2017. As part of the project, the lower floors of the building

were gutted down to the concrete foundation and supports before being rebuilt. The building was reopened for the start of the fall 2019 semester while construction crews continued the finish work.

The project added about 9,000 square feet to what had been a 57,000-square-foot building, enclosed an external walkway on the second floor to expand the dining area, squared off the sloping facade and encapsulated the entire building to make it watertight, and added an atrium entrance off the HCC Courtyard on the

west side and a bridge over Tannery Brook. The bridge leads from a visitors parking lot to a first-floor welcome center, where visitors and students will find easier access to HCC’s offices of admissions, advising, careers, transfer and testing.

College trustee Evan Plotkin, a real estate broker and developer by trade, said first impressions are everything. And the Campus Center creates the perfect first impression.

“What it is about – what this Campus Center project is truly about – is furthering

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Evan Plotkin

the mission of the college and providing students with the very best education and experience,” Plotkin said. “When we address building issues and make advancements and efficiencies, we are creating a physical environment that helps students feel proud. One that gets them excited to learn. And that keeps them coming back.”

Student Maiv Lee-Ruiz said she didn’t want to describe the old center as old or outdated.

“I thought of it as mature, previously loved, vintage,” she said. “The halls were gloomy and felt like a cave. Within the depths of this cave was the bookstore.”

But those days are over.

“We were so excited to see the new space we were jumping for joy,” she said. “The bookstore is no longer in a dungeon. Student Engagement has its own wing.”