AHC officials excited about project

As David Senior looked out at the still-under-construction buildings that will soon make up Hancock College’s new Public Safety Training Complex in Lompoc, his excitement was palpable.

Senior, a retired Santa Barbara County firefighter who is the director of Hancock’s public safety department, has been researching and planning for the new center since the late 1970s, when he was still working for the county.

“Some people say, ‘Oh, this went up fast,’” he said recently, before leading a tour through the nearly completed complex. “Well, that depends on your perspective. For me, it seems like it has taken forever.”

Now that it’s almost here, though, Senior and other Hancock and Lompoc city officials are ecstatic and optimistic about what the new state-of-the-art complex will bring not only to the college, but to the surrounding community.
The PSTC is scheduled to open in January to Hancock students enrolled in public safety courses, which includes police, fire and EMT training. The new complex, which is sitting on 60 acres, will replace what had been an extremely limited center at the college’s Santa Maria south campus.

Among the administrative staff who are scheduled to begin moving over to the new complex this month are Senior, Andy Densmore, a retired Lompoc firefighter who is the coordinator for the Hancock fire academy, and Doug Dickson, a retired Santa Maria firefighter and fire academy supervisor.

Those three were among a group of staff who helped shape the new complex and were consulted throughout the project, which cost about $40 million and was paid for primarily through Measure I funding.

“In our heads, we’ve been working on this for the last 30 years,” Densmore said. “We’ve been thinking, ‘If we had a fire training center, what would we want it to look like? We’ve been all over the state training at other people’s places and we’d leave and say, ‘That was great, but it would have been better if it had this or that.’ So those are the things we wanted to make sure were in this one.’

From the looks of things, they left very few stones uncovered.

The 37,000-square-foot main building of the complex will basically be split in half for fire and police academies and will house several classrooms, labs and workout areas.

One of the EMT labs features an ambulance driving simulator, as well as a mock emergency room in a corner, complete with hospital-style bays and sliding doors typically found at emergency rooms.

The ceiling of the lab has tracks for overhead microphones and cameras. The recording devices will allow instructors and other students to watch and listen in real-time away from the action — there is a small room just off from the lab that will have computers and that offers a view into the lab through one-way glass — as well as later instructional use.

“It’s a great learning tool that we haven’t used enough of,” Senior said of video recording.

One of the most exciting features of the complex, however, is outside of the main building.

To the left of the main entrance is a small burn house that can be set ablaze repeatedly, and a massive six-story fire tower that has potential uses for all of the public safety programs.

The fire house, which has breakaway walls, will allow the fire students to train in a much safer environment than they typically get with controlled burns at old or dilapidated homes.

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"We can send firefighters through here all day, every day, for weeks at a time," Densmore said.
"And we can talk about it as it’s happening without worrying about the building degrading and falling down on us."

Behind the fire tower is a series of deep trenches that continue through tunnels underground and connect to pipes in the tower. The trenches, which can be partially or fully filled with water, will allow for wet, dry and even scuba search and rescue training.

Also connected to the trenches, via a submarine door, is a 10-foot sloped pool in which vehicles can be submerged.

Densmore recalled a rescue he performed years ago at a trench off V Street in which he and his fellow responders were surprised to find that the jaws of life didn’t always work under water.

"Now we can train young firefighters how to operate in that environment, so when they get in the field, they’ll know what to do in that situation," he said.

The fire tower, which has different practice scenarios and props on each floor, also has rappel hooks in several locations on each floor. The bottom of the tower has a mock jail, and the outside of the middle floors are styled after a hotel for police and SWAT training.

Other features at the sprawling complex include:

- A 160-yard enclosed shooting range that has large entrances/exits to allow for police cars to pull in and have students fire out of their vehicles if necessary.
- A 1.3-mile road track that is built for speeds of up to 110 mph. The kidney-shaped track features freeway ramps, traffic lights and railroad crossing areas for pursuit simulations.
- A mock village that will simulate a city block with store fronts for fire and rescue training.
- A large pile of debris, embedded with cameras and microphones, that can accommodate search and rescue training for dogs as well as humans.
- A padded wrestling room and separate weight room with nearby showers and locker rooms for men and women.

After the spring semester, which will serve as a sort of test run for many of the props and staging areas, Hancock officials will look to sign agreements with cities for first responder training, and even private industries for workplace emergency training.

Hancock President Kevin Walthers said the school, which is promoting the center through outreach to fire and police departments around the state, has already received a fair amount of outside interest.

"But nothing’s concrete yet," he said. "There are a lot of people who are hearing about it and saying, ‘Oh, what have you got? So we’re explaining it to them.’"

Walthers, who took over at Hancock this past summer, said he envisions the complex eventually becoming a regional hub for emergency personnel training.

"I think we’ll be able to capture law enforcement groups at least from Ventura County and north," he said. "There’s nothing like this that I know of from here to San Francisco.

"I can see cities and counties coming out and doing coordinated emergency response where all the agencies can work together in one area. If there’s a major event like an earthquake or something, all of those agencies will need to work together."

Densmore, who said he’s looking forward to "turning this place out" and getting the new programs underway, related the PSTC’s projected growth to a famous line from the popular film "Field of Dreams."

"If you build it, they will come (sic)," he said. "That’s what we’re hoping to get out of this."