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Ceremony kicks off John Marshall expansion project

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With trustees and professors swinging sledgehammers and the dean holding a jackhammer, The John Marshall Law School launched its expansion project this morning on State Street.

Dean John E. Corkery called it “the biggest building project we’ve ever entertained.”

The ceremony held inside the former Walgreens store at 300 S. State St. marks the start of the expansion of John Marshall by 50,000 square feet or almost 20 percent.

By extending into the Walgreens space that it already owned, after opting not to renew Walgreens’ lease, John Marshall intends to reorient itself and build a new front entrance that faces State Street.

John Marshall’s current front door is a half block west at 315 S. Plymouth Court and has been since the school purchased that building in 1934.

“Our expansion not only provides needed space but gives the law school the image and presence it deserves, right in the middle of State Street’s South Loop Education Corridor,” said Jordan H. Peters, a partner in Freeborn & Peters LLP and the chairman of the building committee of John Marshall’s board of trustees.

DePaul University’s downtown campus is directly across State Street from the planned new John Marshall entrance.

The addition of the space from the former Walgreens location will give John Marshall a front extending from 300 to 308 S. State St. and a new address of 304 S. State St.

That new space, in the plans drawn up by the firm of Griskelis Young Harrell Architects, will include a new lobby and a large, ground floor student commons in addition to the new entrance.

That first phase of the new expansion will cost about \$6 million, according to the plans shown today.

The second phase of the expansion will be into another newly acquired property at 19 W. Jackson Blvd., that has long been the home, on the ground floor, of the Dollar Daze Inc. store. That phase will bring the total cost of the school’s expansion to \$10 million, said Leonard F. Amari, partner in Amari & Locallo, who is the president of the school’s board of trustees.

As recently as 2008, John Marshall had discussed “a far more grandiose plan” with the city, Amari said. The 2008 idea was to construct a new building in the vacant lot on the northeast



Paul McGrath

(From left to right) Leonard F. Amari, partner in Amari & Locallo, who is the president of The John Marshall Law School’s board of trustees, and John E. Corkery, the law school’s dean, were on hand at today’s expansion ceremony for the school’s 50,000-square-foot addition.

corner of Plymouth Court and Van Buren Street.

That grand plan required at least \$180 million. Then, Amari said, “the economy went into the toilet.”

“We didn’t let the best be the enemy of the good,” Amari said. The alternate to the first expansion plan was launched today.

In his speech to a crowd of about 120 people, Amari said John Marshall is a law school moving from the fourth tier in the U.S. News & World Report rankings to third tier in the most recent edition.

The enrollment is up, he said. According to Corkery, with 1,600 students John Marshall is “one of the largest law schools in the country” and needs more room.

The latest accreditation report for the school from the American Bar Association, based on a 2009 inspection, was “so glowing about John Marshall it was like reading a romance novel about my law school,” Amari said.

Nevertheless, there was some criticism deep in the report that said John Marshall’s technology was “far behind the curve” and it needed a new facility. Thus, Amari said he appointed Peters to head the expansion project.

“In a short period of time, we’re going to have a brand new campus for the kids,” Amari told the audience.

Peters said, “pretty soon, we’re going to have a first-tier campus.” And Corkery told the audience the new space is “evidence of our commitment to law school education and our neighborhood here on State Street.”

At that point, Corkery picked up the orange jackhammer, and Amari, Peters and Alderman Robert W. Fioretti (2nd Ward) and others picked up identical blue sledgehammers. They began to pound on the floor of the old Walgreens.

Others in that group were professors Kenneth G. Kandaras and Rogelio A. Lasso, along with Tim Puntillo, vice president of the general contractor Bulley & Andrews LLC, and Chad Harrell, president of Griskelis Young Harrell Architects.

Among the spectators was Illinois Appellate Court Justice Joseph E. Birkett, a member of the school’s board of trustees.

John Marshall last expanded in 1996 when it purchased the top nine floors in the 321 S. Plymouth Court building, which also houses The Chicago Bar Association on the lower floors.