

The Wichita Eagle

Established 1872 Incorporating The Wichita Beacon

A matter of trust

BY ADAM KNAPP

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As the seats were being folded and put away after the most important Wichita State athletic news conference in recent memory, Shocker athletic director Jim Schaus wiped one of the tears he'd been fighting so hard to hold back.

"Sorry about that," Schaus said. "I've got about two hours of sleep the last week. I guess when I think about some of the generosity of some of these people, and how much I want this project to work, I get real emotional."

For a man as passionate about his work as Schaus, that's understandable.

The project is a \$19.5 million renovation of Levitt Arena into the Levitt Athletic Complex— Koch Arena, Devlin Court, Geist Student Services Building and Downing Academic Learning Center.

Koch Industries, headed by CEO Charles Koch, stepped up with \$6 million, and three other families brought the initial pledges to \$12.5 million before the fund-raising campaign starts.

WSU's announcement, held on the basketball floor of Levitt, wasn't so much a news conference as it was a pep rally— complete with cheerleaders, a band, and even a couple of painted faces in the crowd of about 200. Wichita Mayor Bob Knight made it.

How did we get to this point?

It happened before Schaus was hired in June 1999. Throughout the interview process, the aging arena kept

coming up as a major subject.

Once hired, Schaus surveyed fans. He was mildly surprised when most of the responses said they wanted to improve Levitt, even when given the option of building a new, on-campus facility.

Just as well for Schaus. A new arena with the same seating capacity as Levitt would cost at least \$40 million. "That would have been out of our price range," Schaus said.

Schaus announced that the Shockers would not be playing in a proposed downtown arena, and that plans were under way to renovate Levitt. He hired HOK Sports Facilities Group to tackle the project. It took about seven months to finalize the design.

Plans have been made before, specifically in 1993 and 1995, but they never got off the blueprint.

"We had drawings," Schaus said. "We had ideas. We had dreams. But we had no dollars."

Actually, there was no "we" about it, since Schaus was years away from being hired. Schaus was determined to raise at least half the money before announcing anything.

"You don't even want to be in a position where you think you're going to raise it and you don't," Schaus said. "You announce all this stuff, and you look silly because you couldn't get there. It's like having one foot on the dock, and the boat is a long ways away."

Schaus knew that in campaigns such as this, 80 or 90 percent of the money comes from 10 to 15 percent of the donors.

So to get the boat closer, Schaus remained close with a core group of

6-7 boosters. About two weeks ago, four came through with seven-figure donations.

"I think they're responding to the same leadership commitment they have in their own personal lives," Schaus said.

Leading the pack was Koch, who had gotten to know Schaus and WSU president Don Beggs well in their young tenures.

His company's \$6 million gift shows there's a lot of trust in that relationship.

"There really is," Koch said. "And it has to do with visiting with them, talking to them, understanding their thought process, whether they're down to earth and whether they're thinking in ways based in reality."

And the reality is, Wichita State may have a heck of a nice basketball arena soon.

Which is why Schaus also got teary when announcing the news in Tuesday morning's staff meeting.

"We've just talked about doing this for *so long*," Schaus said. "I almost felt that some people on our staff, and even our constituents, had just lost hope. They were questioning whether we'd *ever* get it done."

"For this to happen is very improbable. And I do know the Lord is very much a part of this project, because everything has fallen into place."

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