

New LCC arts center opens

By Nick Georgiou **LAREDO MORNING TIMES**

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The first phase of LCC's \$120 million facilities master plan culminated Monday with the grand opening of the new, three-story Lewis Energy Group Academic Center and Visual and Performing Arts Center.

Cynthia Mares, president of the Laredo Community College board of trustees, said the grand opening of the two new facilities, as well as the overall plan, represents LCC's strong commitment to improve the quality of life in Laredo.

Teamwork and support is essential, too, she said.

"There are many people to thank for their creativity, commitment and hard work," said Mares, citing LCC administration, Leyendecker Construction, Sepulveda Associates Architects and Lewis Energy Group, which donated \$1 million to the college last year.

Equipment, furnishings

LCC used the large donation to buy equipment and furnish the \$14.7 million academic center.

Rod Lewis, founder and chief executive officer of the Lewis Energy Group, attended the grand opening and offered a few remarks.

"It's an amazing building," said Lewis, who attended Laredo Junior College.

"I'm very happy we were able to do this and we'll see what we can do in the future."

Speaking on behalf of LCC faculty, Dianne Miller, vice president of

instruction, said staff and students are blessed to have the academic center.

"Every student will benefit from this ... flagship facility," she said.

Both buildings were substantially completed in December, after about a year of construction.

LCC had wanted the academic center built in 12 months – in time for the 2012 spring semester – even though such a project would normally take 16 to 18 months to finish.

But workers worked round the clock, including weekends and holidays, to try to meet the 12-month timeline, said LCC President Juan Maldonado.

He noted that he would see Gary Leyendecker of Leyendecker Construction, the project's general contractor, inspecting the facility and workforce on Sundays.

The two new buildings, which are adjacent to each other, are part of LCC's \$120 million, multi-year plan to renovate and refurbish the historic Fort McIntosh campus.

LCC created the plan to bring the college up to date technologically and to accommodate growth in student enrollment.

The plan's first phase, which cost approximately \$33 million, is finished. Work on the estimated \$55 million second phase is underway.

The second phase involves remodeling or expanding about 15 LCC buildings.

It could take up to three years to complete the phase, Maldonado said.

Meanwhile, student tuition and fees and property tax revenue will bolster the plan's financing.

To help fund the plan, LCC has begun to phase in a 4.5-cent property tax rate increase.

The rate increase would be about 1.5 cents each fiscal year, through 2014.

"I know it's difficult because we have tough economic times," Maldonado said.

But the college can't turn anywhere else for support, he said.

"We can't depend on the state anymore," Maldonado said, referring to the state's ever-declining financial support of community colleges. "We have to rely on the community."

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