Years of speculation, years of discussion and a lot of planning in recent months, and now Frontier Conference officials, presidents and athletic directors will see the fruits of their labor.

League officials wrapped up two days of meetings on Tuesday by announcing that Dickinson State University and Southern Oregon University will become the newest members of the Frontier, starting in the 2012-13 school year.

DSU, located in Dickinson, N.D., has an enrollment of 2,767 and will join the league as a full member. For years, DSU has participated in the Dakota Athletic Conference, but that league began to disband several years ago, as several of its core members starting moving up to NCAA Division II. Southern Oregon, located in Ashland, Ore., will join the Frontier as a football-only member. SOU, like current Frontier associate member Eastern Oregon, competes in all other sports in the Cascade Conference, but has been a football independent the last few years.

“I’ve said all along that this is a win-win,” Frontier Conference commissioner Kent Paulson said to the Billings Gazette on Tuesday night. “This is a historic day in the Frontier Conference. We had a bridge to cross and, by golly, we got on the other side of the river.”

The meetings this week also involved Menlo College of California and Jamestown College, another school from the soon-to-be defunct DAC. All four schools made presentations to current league officials, but Menlo and Jamestown decided to pull back for the time being. Meanwhile, DSU and SOU were unanimously voted in by league officials, and now a plan to have the expansion process in place by 2012 will go forward.

The current expansion will give the Frontier nine teams for basketball and volleyball and eight teams for football. But Paulson, along with MSU-Northern athletic director and head football coach Mark Samson also said other schools are being looked at for further expansion, so the initial landscape of the new-look Frontier could change in the next year.

“I think adding these schools is a very positive step for the future of our conference,” Samson said. “But I’d also like to see more full members added. I would like to see more schools competing in all sports in our league, because that gives more teams the opportunity to compete at the national championship level, and it is also better for our conference as a whole. But this is definitely a positive for our league and a good step forward.

“I’m going to go out on a limb and say that before 2012 hits we may have already added some other teams,” Paulson said.

As it stands, football in the Frontier could change dramatically by 2012. Not only could the league have a second automatic bid to the NAIA playoffs, but the schedule will look somewhat different. Initial plans for an eight-team league will call for 10 conference games, which means home-and-away schedules will...
continue. There will likely be two divisions, with initial plans calling for Northern, Dickinson, Carroll College and Rocky Mountain College in one division, and Montana Tech, UM-Western, EOU and SOU in the other. Inside the divisions, teams will play each other twice, as is the current Frontier schedule, while the other four conference games will be teams from opposite divisions going head-to-head once a year. Adding additional football schools could change that plan however.

As for basketball and volleyball, as of now, things won’t change much, especially for Northern, which plays Dickinson home and away every year in basketball anyway. However, it will add two more conference games to the schedule for both basketball and volleyball and will alter traveling schedules and traveling partners somewhat. Again, if schools like Jamestown are eventually added as full members, scheduling could change even more.

“There are a lot of things we have to go and look at now, and scheduling is a big one,” Samson said. “We will be working to put together schedules for how the league looks right now. But there are certainly some situations where things in regard to travel will change. And things could change again if we move forward with adding even more schools as full members.”

Regardless if the Frontier continues to add schools, Tuesday was indeed a historic day. The Frontier hasn’t changed since the University of Great Falls re-added sports almost a decade ago, although Eastern Oregon became an associate member five years ago. And before that, the league was the same until Montana State-Billings, formerly Eastern Montana College, left the Frontier to move to NCAA Division II.

So this time in the Frontier has everyone excited.

"I was just excited to hear that the Frontier Conference presidents are not only committed to expansion but they’re committed to bringing in a number of teams," Paulson said. "They really feel like there's strength in numbers.

"We are poised and ready to become the premier conference in the NAIA."