Northern to dedicate new gym Thursday
Tim Leeds
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Montana State University-Northern is inviting people to come and see the new face of its gymnasium Thursday with a dedication and open house before the Skylights basketball game.

Shauna Albrecht, director of the MSU-Northern Foundation, was doing some finishing work in the Armory Gymnasium Tuesday and said the first phase of the renovation project has made a major difference.

"I think people are really shocked when they come in and see it. I think it's beyond what people thought it was going to look it," Albrecht said, adding, "It's pretty stunning, I think."

The open house and dedication is set to start at 5 p.m., with the Skylights basketball game to follow at 6 p.m.

Northern Chancellor Jim Limbaugh credited Albrecht and the co-chairs of the Foundation’s Lighting Up Our Future capital campaign, Dave Clausen and Cole Chandler, with the idea of upgrading the gym and putting the work in motion — all before he came on board last January — along with the community support in funding and helping do the renovations.

"I am lucky enough to come and enjoy it along with everybody," he said.

Albrecht credited the generosity of the community, both in contributions to the capital campaign to pay for the work and in donating work to help do the renovation, for the success.

"This community has been tremendous..." she said. "I mean, I knew we had a generous community, but this is, I think, beyond anybody's dreams."

She said the campaign raised about $650,000 for the first phase of the project that now is completed.

"It’s been all through donations from generous friends and alums of Northern," Albrecht said.

Limbaugh said the new face of the gymnasium, called the Armory from when it doubled as the National Guard Armory until the Guard’s Havre facility was built, is a win-win for everybody. The work has created an environment that benefits the athletes, the students and the community, he said.

"I think it’s a real boon to the community to have this little jewel box of a gymnasium," he said. "It’s beautiful. It adds to the enthusiasm. Games here are unlike anything I’ve ever seen in terms of student excitement and community support and the engagement of the team."

Christian Oberquell, Northern’s athletic director, said it will benefit the teams both on the quality of the gym and in recruitment.

The previous floor — installed in 1956 — had close to the same give as concrete, Oberquell said, about 10 percent to 15 percent. The new top-of-the-line performance sports floor has 70 percent to 75 percent give, he said.

That will help the athletes in performance and reduce fatigue and injuries, Oberquell said.
“Health-wise, it’s going to be a huge, huge advantage,” he said.

Albrecht said the gym has been redone from top to bottom, with the new floor, new bleachers, new backdrops for the side basketball hoops, some work in the lobby, painting and "a lot of TLC things that needed to happen."

Local businesses were hired to do much of the contracted work, including Clausen and Sons, Patrick Construction, Schine Electric and Hi-Line Audio and Video, she said.

Local groups and businesses also donated in-kind services, ranging from Northern athletes to members of the Havre Youth Hockey Association to local contractors.

Oberquell said the gym appearance and quality will help the athletic program, both in competition and in recruitment.

One benefit is that the remodel seems to have made the Armory Gymnasium even louder, he said, which should benefit the home team.

"We can actually bring kids into our gym now and show them that we’ve made an effort. We’re comparable to all the other gyms in the conference,” he said. "Right now, we have the best floor in the conference; we probably have the best seating. We definitely have the loudest gym. …

“It’s a huge improvement, “ Oberquell said. "It’s a night-and-day difference to me. When you walk into the gym and just, the way the floor looks, and now that the bleachers are done, it’s a night-and-day difference.

“It just looks like a modern facility now,” he said.