



# Monthly Newsletter

FACILITIES FORUM  
January 2026



PHOTO BY TODD PARIS

## EXCITEMENT BUILDS AS UAF PLANETARIUM NEARS COMPLETION



PHOTO BY BRYAN WHITTEN

By Lesa Sears

Construction continues to make impressive progress on the new planetarium at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, and momentum is building as the facility prepares for its highly anticipated opening in late February.

Adding to the excitement, Omega Smith was recently named Planetarium Director, officially beginning her role on October 1. A lifelong Alaskan, Smith developed an early passion for astronomy and brings more than 12 years of experience from two planetariums in Anchorage. She now leads what will become the farthest north planetarium in the western hemisphere.

“Fairbanks is a really unique location,” Smith shared. “Being on the UAF campus, where there’s incredible research—especially on the aurora—gives us a powerful opportunity to tell the stories of the science and discovery happening right here in the Interior.”

Much of the planetarium’s exterior construction is now complete, with the design carefully matched to the architecture of the Museum of the North. Inside, crews are working steadily to prepare the space for opening. The planetarium dome is expected to arrive within days, after which technicians will begin installing the projection and sound systems that will bring the sky to life for visitors.

Smith is already deep into planning content for opening day, noting that every detail matters—from how visitors move between museum spaces to how stories of science, culture, and the night sky are shared. She hopes the planetarium will highlight not only UAF’s cutting-edge research, but also the Indigenous knowledge and unique ways of understanding the night sky rooted in Alaska’s Interior.

When completed, the building’s outer wall will proudly display the names Walt and Marita Babula, whose \$7.4 million gift, the largest donation from living individuals in UAF’s history, made the planetarium possible.

The new planetarium promises to become a cornerstone of learning, inspiration, and community engagement for Fairbanks and beyond.

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SURVEY

Take the Survey and help design a planetarium that reflects the creativity, curiosity, and diversity of UAF.

# Nathan's 10 Facilities Predictions for 2026.

By Nathan Platt

Hello everyone, Nathan here. Each year, I make ten predictions about what will happen in or around UAF Facilities in the next 12 months. Some are serious, and some are just for fun. Let's look back on my predictions for 2025, and see how well I did. Then I'll roll out my 10 new predictions for 2026!

1. The UAF Child Care Center planned for UPark will receive full funding and full support from the University administration. Renovation efforts will start mid-summer, and by the end of 2025, we'll be planning a grand opening ceremony for the building, which will serve the UAF and Fairbanks community with safe, affordable, licensed child care for many years to come.
  - There was a small delay in the project to convert the old UPark building to a childcare center, but the project is currently out to bid, and we're optimistic that the renovation will move forward this spring, and the Child Care Center will be operational in 2026.
2. The Honors House on Copper Lane has been on the "tear down" list for many years. I predict that in 2025 it will NOT be demolished, rather the University will decide to put a new roof on the building, conduct a small interior renovation, add a wheelchair ramp, and keep it open for the Honors Program for several more years.
  - I got this one completely wrong! The Honors House was demolished this fall.
3. I have a different prediction about the Chancellor's House. I suspect that in 2025, the University will determine that the structure is beyond its useful life, and schedule it to be removed. The site will eventually be used for new housing (but not in 2025).
  - The Chancellor's House is still standing, and is not currently on the "tear down" list.
4. I predict that we will install the much-anticipated standby generator at the Physical Plant building. This generator will allow our building to be 100% functional in a power outage, enhancing our abilities to serve the rest of campus during those events.
  - Unfortunately, this project was not funded, and probably won't be for the foreseeable future. Although the need for a standby generator at the Physical Plant is well documented, it's not high enough on the Capital Projects list to move forward this year.
5. During 2025, the new Planetarium will be finished on the west side of the UA Museum of the North and open to much fanfare. I predict the opening ceremony will be attended by at least one US Senator, and tickets to the shows held in the building will sell out for months. It will increase visitation to the Museum, particularly in the winter months.
  - The Walt and Marita Babula Planetarium is currently under construction and is expected to open this spring. I still think the opening ceremony will be well attended and tickets to the planetarium shows will sell out.
6. I predict that the University will make important decisions about the future of the lower campus residence halls in 2025, keeping two of them open and planning the demolition of the other three. Although I don't think any of them will actually be torn down in 2025, I predict they will not house students after August of this next year.
  - What a difference a year makes! At the beginning of 2025, three of the five lower campus residence halls were empty, and I was pretty confident that we would take them down. Fortunately, the number of students looking for on campus housing increased this year, and UAF is partnering with the US Air Force to use both Nerland and Stevens to house 100 airmen starting this winter. It looks like the lower campus residence halls will be around for a little while longer.
7. Facilities Services will conduct a large brush-clearing effort on campus to meet new insurance guidelines, especially north of the Cutler apartment complex. Trees will be cut back more than 100 feet from the buildings. I predict that, as part of that effort, a long forgotten research project will be rediscovered deep in the woods, leading to a stoppage of work while it's investigated by scientists.
  - This didn't happen. We're still in discussions with our insurance carrier, FM Global, about how much of the brush and trees we need to remove around campus.
8. I predict that interest in building a new UAF hotel on campus will continue to grow in 2025, a final site will be chosen (which I think will be a big surprise to everyone, and it will NOT be directly across the road from the SRC), and a design concept will be finalized. UAF will work with a local developer to design the building, and by the end of 2025, we'll be scheduling a groundbreaking ceremony for the spring.
  - No progress was made on this in 2025. The idea of building a hotel on the Troth Yeddha' campus seems to have started to fade away, and I'm less certain that it will happen any time soon.
9. This is a two-part prediction... UAF will achieve two important "firsts" on campus in 2025... we'll get our first electric car charging station and our first drive-through coffee stand.
  - Neither of these two things happened, but I will be recycling one of these predictions for 2026.
10. Superintendent of Operations, Darrin "Bear" Edson's retirement party in October of 2025 will be the social event of the year for Facilities Services. Bear will go on to become a reality TV star, write adventure novels, and eventually come back part-time to help train the next generation of UAF equipment operators.
  - Bear has decided to stay on with Facilities Services until this spring... be on the lookout for more information about a retirement party in April!

Here are my ten facilities-based predictions for what might happen here at UAF in 2026, in no particular order.

1. Great progress will be made in planning for the construction of new housing buildings on campus. Although we won't break ground this year, our confidence in the project will be high enough that we will start demolition of the duplexes and triplexes on North Chandalar. I predict that at least two buildings will be demolished by the end of 2026. Although the new housing will primarily be planned for where the North Chandalar homes are now, new interest will be focused on Copper Lane, now that those buildings are completely gone.
2. This is my first "recycled" prediction... Construction on the Upark childcare center project will start this spring and be completed by the end of the calendar year. At the beginning of 2027, their enrollment will be full (with a waitlist), and the program will be seen as a great success.
3. Here's my second "recycled" prediction: UAF will get our first electric car charging station on campus in 2026.
4. The thermokarst sinkhole on the north side of Akasofu will be filled in with the leftover dirt and gravel from the Museum project. The area currently occupied by that dirt pile will be turned into a small green space, rather than parking. I further predict that the sinkhole is NOT done growing, so we'll continue to keep an eye on it for several years to come.
5. Alaska will get a new governor, and UAF will get a new Chancellor in 2026. I predict the new Governor and Chancellor will both take a keen interest in reducing our deferred maintenance backlog and increasing our efforts toward facility renewal. This will mean the maintenance and capital projects budgets will look better next year.
6. I predict that UAF will be presented with an opportunity to replace some or all of our fleet of shuttle buses with new, natural gas-powered buses. By the end of 2026, I predict the first batch of new, ADA accessible buses will be on order, and we will have plans to begin construction of a natural gas fueling station, probably somewhere between the Physical Plant and the Power Plant.
7. This one is just for fun... building on the success of our sign shop's vinyl decal program, by the end of 2026, there will be plans to cover 75% of the campus walls with decals, and John Smith will be one of the busiest employees of Facilities Services.
8. The Into the Wild bus will be established as a permanent outdoor public exhibit at the Museum, the bus will be moved to its new location in the wooded area just north of the building, and will start drawing thousands of visitors each year. Further, I predict that the opening of the exhibit will make national news.
9. I predict that the new NCAA ski trail on the UAF campus will continue to grow in popularity, and that funding will be available to make permanent repairs and improvements, resolving the erosion problems that we experienced this year. I predict that one of the improvements will be permanent lighting, which will be installed by the beginning of ski season in the fall of 2026.
10. Finally, I predict that, in 2026, Otto Geist's buried cache of 30 mammoth tusks will be found somewhere on the UAF campus!

Check back in early 2027 to see how many of my predictions for this year came true.

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## UAF Events

JAN 9 UTILITIES FIRST FRIDAY TOUR 1:30 PM

[UAF NEWS AND EVENTS](#)

[SUPPORT UAF SPORTS](#)



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# Employee of the Month - Mija McGuire

By Kellie Fritze

Please join me in congratulating **Mija McGuire from Warehouse/Business Services** as our Employee of the Month!

Mija's reliability, follow-through, and commitment to getting things done the right way have made a real difference for Facilities Services and the broader UAF community. She brings a calm, positive presence to every interaction, and she consistently delivers high-quality work. Please join me in congratulating Mija on this well-deserved recognition and thanking her for all she does!

## Reasons for Nomination

### Achievements and Accomplishments:

Mija has successfully navigated significant personnel challenges in her departments while maintaining high standards of performance. She has improved communication and project coordination, and she consistently ensures departmental work is completed on time with accuracy and attention to detail. Despite increased workloads due to staffing changes, she continued to deliver exceptional results, producing a high volume of work while maintaining quality.

### Positive Attitude and Behavior:

Mija is known for her reliability, follow-through, and positive presence. She approaches each request as though it is her top priority, balancing a heavy workload with professionalism and a smile. Her respectful and supportive demeanor encourages open communication among staff, creating an environment where team members feel comfortable bringing forward issues and ideas.

### Teamwork and Collaboration:

She has built strong collaborative relationships within Facilities Services and across campus, effectively partnering with trades staff, senior management, and external stakeholders. By holding group and one-on-one meetings, she has fostered stronger connections with her staff, leading to more cohesive teamwork and a shared understanding of goals and responsibilities.

### Leadership and Initiative:

Mija has taken the initiative to identify process improvements, demonstrating strong problem-solving skills and a commitment to efficiency. Her ability to delegate effectively and set high standards for her team reflects her growth as a leader and her dedication to continuous improvement.

### Customer Service and Satisfaction:

Mija's commitment to excellence extends to the way she interacts with colleagues and customers across the University. She ensures that processes are followed correctly, maintains clear communication, and delivers results that exceed expectations. Her responsiveness and ability to balance multiple priorities enhance the overall customer experience, ensuring Facilities Services continues to serve the University community with professionalism and integrity.

Congratulations to Mija! If you'd like to nominate a colleague for next month's Employee of the Month, you can do so [here](#).

-Kellie

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# UAF Benefits

Contact the UA Benefits team  
(907) 450-8242 | [ua-benefits@alaska.edu](mailto:ua-benefits@alaska.edu)  
[Schedule one-on-one time](#)

Need personal benefits help?  
[TouchCare](#) | 1-866-486-8242  
[assist@touchcare.com](mailto:assist@touchcare.com) | [TouchCare's Website](#)

## Current Recruitments



Alarms Technician - 530903	CT2 Building Maintenance Technician - 531567	HVAC Technician (CT2/CT3) - 531527
HVAC Technician (MSW4-CT1) - 531479	Sprinkler Technician - 531582	Temporary Grounds Maintenance - 531611
Temporary Part-time Shuttle - 531239		

## First Friday Tour at the Central Heat and Power Plant

The Utilities Operations Division of Facilities Services offers monthly tours of the UAF Combined Heat and Power (CHP) Plant. Tours take place on the first Friday of each month at 1:30 p.m., meeting on the first floor of the CHP Turbine Building (north side entrance).

To help us plan for the appropriate number of tour guides, please email [UAF-chptours@alaska.edu](mailto:UAF-chptours@alaska.edu) in advance to reserve your spot. If you have any questions or would like to arrange a special tour, please contact us at the same email address.

We look forward to seeing you!



*Thank you for reading!*