

New 'retreat' for executives

By NANCY BARR

A 55-year-old building that began as a Catholic high school for boys, was later used as a novitiate, and has stood empty for nearly a decade, is being turned into a conference center.

The former Chaminade High School sits atop a hill behind Dominican Hospital near Santa Cruz with a commanding view of much of the Midcounty. By May, it will be an "upscale" conference center designed specifically to attract executives.

Chaminade opened in 1930 as a boys' day school. In the '40s it was turned into a novitiate for the Marianist Order. It was named after the founder of that order, Father William Chaminade.

The Catholic Church closed the novitiate in the mid-'70s, occasionally using the secluded property for retreats thereafter.

In 1978, the Church sold the property to Larry Swanson, Carl Taylor and Frank Hildreth, who are now turning it to the new use.

Swanson and Hildreth had experience in managing conference facilities — Swanson in a job at UC-Davis and Hildreth while he worked at Stanford University. Taylor's job in the food industry brought him in touch with the other two, and they decided to combine their experience, joining together in a general partnership, for the conference center venture.

They fixed up the old school with 10 meeting rooms, a state-of-the-art audio-visual center, and a dining room, lounges and a library that take advantage of the beautiful view of Midcounty, the Monterey Bay and the hills surrounding the DeLaveaga Golf Course.

Eleven smaller buildings were constructed to house the guests in motel-style rooms.

The entire facility was designed to attract executive training seminars and conferences.

"This is a facility designed for meetings," Swanson said in a recent

interview, "— not conventions but conferences."

Those conferences will be education-oriented, he said, and usually for much smaller groups than would attend a professional or trade convention. Chaminade Whitney — the name given the conference center — can accommodate as many as 240 people, but Swanson estimated most conferences will attract fewer than 100.

It is not a convention center, a hotel or a resort. Swanson and Taylor explained, but it does combine aspects of each. It has rooms to accommodate small seminars or large meetings, along with guest rooms for those attending. It will have recreational facilities, such as a pool, health club and spas. And it is in a perfect location, Taylor said, because it is quiet and isolated yet close enough to town for those who don't like to be confined to a remote setting.

Taylor and Swanson say they believe most of their

business will come from California, but they also expect to attract groups from all over the world.

They have set a flat rate of \$130 per person per day, based on double occupancy. That fee includes the use of all facilities, three meals a day and a room.

Taylor and Swanson said they want Chaminade Whitney to be a place conducive to learning, and kept that in mind as they designed the facilities. The meeting rooms are comfortable, and the guest rooms have study areas and convenient connections for personal computers.

The video system will allow an event occurring in any of the meeting rooms to be watched on a television set in any other room — including the guest rooms.

A number of conferences have already been lined up, including the first West Coast seminars to be offered under the Executive Challenge Program of the Boston University School of Management.



Photo by Kurt Ellison

The old Chaminade High School is being converted to conference center for executives