Planning is well under way for a new 80,000-square-foot Oregon Research Institute building, with site work expected to begin early in 2009 at the University of Oregon’s Riverfront Research Park, the project’s architect said Friday.

“We’re working on it pretty diligently,” said Cameron Hyde, president of Soderstrom Architects in Portland. “It looks to me like they’re hoping to start construction the first of the year.”

ORI, founded in 1960 by a group of UO faculty, currently has its workforce of more than 250 split between a leased building on Franklin Boulevard and one floor of a building in the research park.

The two locations account for a combined 57,000 square feet of office space.

The nonprofit institute performs behavioral and health studies, primarily for the National Institutes of Health.

The research firm made plans five years ago to build its new home at the site of the former Sears building in downtown Eugene, but that project fell apart when a grant proposal to the NIH failed to receive funding.

More recently, ORI had been considered a likely tenant for a renovated Centre Court building in downtown Eugene.

But the institute announced in May that it had instead chosen the 3-acre site on the western edge of the Riverfront Research Park, near the U.S. Courthouse and the Eugene Water & Electric Board complex.

“It’s a spectacular site, right on the river there,” Hyde said Friday.

The new building is being developed by Trammel Crow Co., a national real estate giant that will retain ownership of the building and lease it to ORI. The research institute will have an option to eventually buy the building, under terms of a development deal that’s still being worked out.
Soderstrom Architects has scheduled a nonpublic consultation meeting Aug. 12, with staff from Eugene’s Planning & Development Department.

“They’ll probably be talking to the building department to make sure we have everything ironed out, and we aren’t going to have any surprises when they apply for a building permit,” Hyde said.

The architectural firm is currently working on schematic and conceptual drawings for the projects, and will complete the full set of working plans by the end of November, he said.

ORI, which pays an average annual salary of more than $45,000, has been wooed for the past several years as a key part of ongoing redevelopment efforts in downtown Eugene.

It had been considering five development offers at sites around Eugene before choosing the Riverfront Research Park location for what ORI officials have promised will be “an environmentally sustainable building.”

The research park, which is part of the UO, will continue to own the land and will lease it to building owner Trammel Crow.

ORI’s current office leases expire in June 2009, but those are expected to be extended until mid-2010, when the new building is scheduled for completion.

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