At nearly 332,000 square feet, the gray behemoth that is Kansas University's Malott Hall is the university's largest building and by far the most expensive to replace.

Sheer size plays a role in that replacement cost — estimated at $98.5 million, according to the Kansas Board of Regents — but so does the fact that much of KU's basic science research goes on inside Malott.

A lot has happened in science since Malott was built in 1954, and KU officials say Malott has become outdated and ill-equipped for modern science teaching and research. The university could begin construction on a major new physical science facility by fall 2015.

Dubbed the "Earth, Energy, and Environment Center," or EEEC, the project has garnered more than $40 million in support from private donors, along with a $3 million commitment from KU and legislative approval of $25 million in university bonds this spring.

With funds in hand, the university will soon hire designers and contractors to begin work on the project.

Danny Anderson, dean of the KU College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, said the project has been a dream at the college for more than a decade.

"The kinds of things that are required for 21st century science, both science teaching and research, the building (Malott) cannot accommodate," Anderson said. "We're at a limit in terms of the kinds of things faculty and students can do, because we're held back by facilities."

Anderson hopes to hold a launch party for the project in this fall and to be "digging holes in the ground about a year after that."

The EEC project would expand Lindley Hall and add a new building to campus. The project's north building, where Lindley is now, will hold lab space that Anderson hopes can attract top scholars as faculty. The north building would also hold a new high-tech teaching auditorium, funded through a $5 million donation from the Oklahoma City-based Chesapeake Energy Corporation.

The south building will hold offices, an environmentally controlled lab for working with nano technology, and space for working with private companies, where, Anderson said, "industry seeking expertise from KU can hold meetings and have an interface."

Under the heading of the Earth, Energy, and Environment Center, the building will house a host of sciences, including geology, geography, atmospheric science, and some chemistry and physics offices, among others.

The project would be the first piece in an $800 million expanded science and technology corridor proposed in KU's longterm master plan. The corridor would connect existing science and engineering buildings and march westward toward the science facilities on West Campus.

As the science corridor expands beyond the EEEC, new, smaller and more flexible facilities would, over time and if all goes according to plan, gradually replace the aging laboratories in Malott.