

Broncos React to WMU's New Downtown Hockey Arena and Shuttle Service

Western Michigan University students are preparing for a major shift as the Bronco hockey team plans to relocate from Lawson Ice Arena to WMU's new downtown event center, projected to open in the Fall of 2027. The move, part of a broader effort to strengthen WMU's presence within the city of Kalamazoo, has stirred both excitement and nostalgia among students who have long viewed Lawson as a core part of campus life.

To support student access to the new arena, WMU recently announced a free shuttle service known as the Juice Bus, which currently runs between campus and downtown on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m., according to a WMU release. University officials say the service will expand to accommodate game days once the new arena opens, providing direct transportation to and from the venue.

For many students, that convenience could make the difference in whether they attend games after the move.

"I'll definitely still go to games," said Abby Milligan, 23, a junior studying marketing. "Lawson has so much history and energy, but the new arena sounds like it's going to be next level. As long as there's an easy way to get there, I'm all in. I love that the school thought ahead with the shuttle – that's huge."

Head Hockey Coach Pat Ferschweiler said the new arena will offer opportunities that simply aren't possible at Lawson.

"It's going to be a world-class facility," Ferschweiler said. "Not just an arena – a world-class training center and experience. The new building will give our players every modern amenity to train, improve and even recover at the highest level."

Still, he acknowledges that leaving Lawson will be emotional.

“There’s a bittersweet feel to it,” he said. “We have one of the best home-ice advantages in college hockey. The lunatics, the low ceiling, the volume – we all love that. But the new arena is designed to keep the same intimate, electric atmosphere, just with more space and modern resources.”

Some students are concerned about logistics rather than legacy.

“Lawson’s right here on campus,” said Ryan Afton, 23, a senior in criminal justice. “You could walk from the dorms or your apartment. The downtown arena will be awesome, but it’s definitely going to feel different. I just hope the shuttle runs late enough after games so people aren’t stuck figuring out rides.”

Ferschweiler said student transportation was a top priority in planning.

“This has all been thought through,” he said. “There will be a dedicated bus lane at the new arena for student drop-off and pick-up. Students will get a ride right to the door and back. It’ll be smooth, efficient and easy.”

For Kally Howlett, 22, a junior studying psychology, the move represents opportunity.

“I’m excited,” she said. “WMU being more connected to downtown makes the university feel like part of the city, not separate from it. And the shuttle makes it way more accessible. I don’t have a car, so the fact that it’s free is huge. I’ll probably go to more games than I did before.”

Ferschweiler agrees that the move could help bring the campus and community closer together.

“It melds the two together,” he said. “It’s not campus and city anymore – it’s us, together. The city has treated us incredibly well. We’re excited to expand that partnership.”

As the arena continues toward its projected 2027 opening, students are balancing nostalgia for Lawson with anticipation for what's ahead.

"I'll miss Lawson," Howlett said. "But I think once we're all downtown cheering together. It'll still feel like home – just in a new place."