New year, new retreat
By Kevin Craver
September 3, 2010

The buzz of tools can be heard coming from the Loyola University Chicago Retreat and Ecology Campus east of Woodstock. And on campus, an excited buzz can be heard from students who can’t wait to pay it a visit, according to college officials. Although only a few college groups have gotten to visit the former Resurrection Retreat Center, the word is out, Vice President of Student Development Robert Kelly said. Retreats likely will begin in earnest by month’s end.

“They think this is amazing, and in a lot of ways this really helps us,” Kelly said. “We’re doing a lot of construction on our campus – students are saying, ‘You’re building a lot for the students of tomorrow, but what about us now?’ Many students are just finding out about this.”

Loyola has ambitious plans for the 100-guest retreat center on 98 acres at 2710 S. Country Club Road. It will allow the Catholic and Jesuit university to offer retreats for all first-year students, as well as increase retreat offerings for upperclassmen.

Besides being a retreat for students and many of the college’s 200 clubs and organizations, the property’s prairie, woodlands, oak savannah and wetlands will serve the college’s ecology and biology curricula. Loyola also is creating an outdoor activity program for students and faculty.

Although the college is renovating the facility to incorporate a classroom and lab area, it has no plans to expand the building, Kelly said.

The college bought the property in May for $6.4 million from its longtime owner, Chicago-based Congregation of the Resurrection. The congregation aborted its controversial proposal to convert the retreat and convention center into senior living because of a lack of funding.

The congregation applied in late 2008 for a conditional-use permit to convert it into a 123-unit senior assisted-care community. Schools stopped using it for high school retreats because of the cost, and the congregation did not find success in repurposing it for business retreats and conventions.
Neighbors overwhelmingly opposed converting the center and building new duplexes for senior living and expressed concerns about traffic and the impact on the area’s sensitive ecology.

While the county Zoning Board of appeals sided with neighbors and voted to recommend denial, the County Board in May 2009 overrode the ZBA on a 17-6 vote.

Loyola is working to voluntarily annex into Bull Valley and intends to soon present a proposed annexation agreement, Village President Brian Miller said. Miller said the village was excited about the college keeping the property as a retreat and helping to preserve the village’s environment.

Loyola has pledged to help neighbors preserve and maintain ecologically-sensitive lands and assist the McHenry County Conservation District and similar agencies in doing the same.

“We think it will fit in perfectly with the village of Bull Valley,” Miller said. “The things they try to teach the students is the same thing we’ve been stressing since the village was founded.”