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Museum to be air-conditioned

By Loren Berthelsen
Staff Reporter

After museum staff lobbied for six years for the installation of an air-conditioning system to protect museum exhibits at Morrill Hall, installation finally will begin Jan. 1, 1988.

Harley Schrader, director of UNL's Physical Plant, said he expects the construction to last 12 to 18 months because the exhibits must be protected.

The construction will be financed through a \$4.1 million bond issue authorized by the 1987 Legislature. The bonds will be repaid with an annual appropriation of \$695,178 from cigarette tax revenues.

Morrill Hall, commonly known as Elephant Hall, currently has no climate control system, although the building is heated during the winter.

Mary Pritchard, curator of parasitology and biology professor, said seasonal temperature fluctuations of more than 60 degrees and high humidity erode carefully preserved fossils.

Fossilized bones are perfectly preserved while in the ground, Pritchard said, but once excavated, oxygen in the air begins to break them down.

Although all preserved fossils are impregnated with shellac or a similar compound, Pritchard said, the changing temperature and humidity make the fossils expand and contract. If allowed to go unchecked, the expansion and contraction will cause the fossilized bone to break down.

Pritchard said that maintaining exhibits is a continuous job for the museum staff. Many of the museum's best collections can't be displayed because of the potential for damage, she said.

The museum will not close during renovation. Construction will be done in phases so that only part of the building will be closed at one time.

Pritchard said she is enthusiastic about the museum's changes. She said Morrill Hall is recognized around the world for its fossil collections of elephants and camels, especially the giant Archidiskodon Maibeni, the largest fossilized elephant skeleton ever dis-



Andrea Hoy/Daily Nebraskan

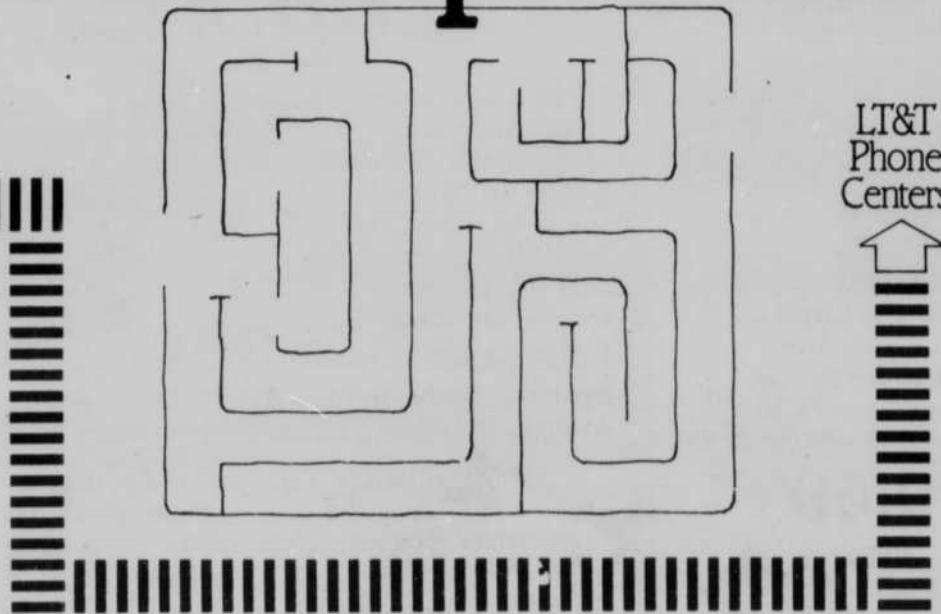
Hugh Genoways, director of Morrill Hall, stands in front of one of the elephant displays that will benefit from the new air-conditioning system.

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covered. Each year 250,000 people visit the museum. Pritchard said 80 percent of all students graduating from Nebraska high schools will have visited "Elephant Hall" sometime in their lives.

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