Coming out of the storm

The new Abbeville High School, shown Tuesday, is nearing completion after repairs were made to recover from damage suffered from Hurricane Lili in 2002.

Abbeville High repairs from hurricane damage near completion

Bernard Chaillot
bchaillot@theadvertiser.com

ABBEVILLE — Maintenance workers who rode out Hurricane Lili in October inside Abbeville High School had some anxious moments as the storm’s 100-mile-per-hour winds methodically ripped the roof off.

They are credited with preventing further damage by moving sensitive computer and other equipment and ignoring their own safety by doing emergency damage-prevention work at the height of the storm.

Still, the 30-year-old facility had more than $3 million in damage. Pieces of the roof have scattered for blocks. Students shared a middle school campus in an ill-conceived and unpopular experiment before finishing the year in the hastily renovated Charles Gay building — formerly the Fruit of the Loom plant.

Now that repairs to the school are near completion, storm memories seem like a terrible nightmare, Principal Randy Schexnayder said. He said some equipment could be moved back by the end of the month.

“The seniors had a rough year and showed their true colors by handling it better than might have been expected,” Schexnayder said. He said students who return this fall may feel like they are in a new school.

Seniors and others spent part of their recent spring break helping out with various tasks, he said.

Superintendent Joseph Hebert said on a recent inspection with Schexnayder that consulting architect Gene Sellers Jr. of The Sellers Group of Abbeville and Lafayette that considering the relatively uncooperative weather over the past seven months, repairs have gone smoothly.

“It is amazing,” Hebert said. “As recently as two months ago, there were no ceilings or floors.”

Sellers said that barring any unforeseen delays, total completion of the project is about two months away — a scant six weeks before the start of the fall term. He said the main work that still needs to be done is in the auditorium, which suffered major water damage.

Sellers said the final phase of the work will involve cleaning the school from top to bottom.

Angelique Windham, a transfer from Homestead, Fla., said she can sympathize with students here.

“My school was destroyed by Hurricane Andrew in 1992,” she said. “I was only in kindergarten at the time, but I remember it like it was yesterday. I know how the kids here feel. I've been there.”