

At Rutgers, new buildings are community effort Honors college is part of the plan to help school, students connect with city

By [Joshua Burd](#), October 5, 2015 at 3:00 AM



Rutgers University's New Brunswick Honors College. - (PHOTO BY AARON HOUSTON)

For a campus that has looked essentially the same for 50 years, a few new buildings will be a welcome sight.

But the New Brunswick Development Corp. is thinking about more than a simple facelift as it carries out the \$330 million redevelopment of Rutgers University's College Avenue campus. Instead, the developer is building with an eye toward connecting Rutgers to the surrounding community, both by bringing more students to the neighborhood and creating spaces that cater to more than just the campus population.

“I think this is an opportunity for alumni and people who live in the community all to participate,” said Christopher Paladino, president of the New Brunswick Development Corp. “And one of the things about going to a big state university — or living in a community where there's a big state university — is being able to have that interaction between those different populations, and it doesn't really happen here.”

Having just completed a 550-bed residential honors college, the developer known as Devco is now focused on a new academic building and a new mixed-use student housing project nearby. He said the latter, which will sit at College Avenue and Hamilton Street, could be especially transformative when it comes to engaging the neighborhood, thanks to 15,000 square feet of new retail and a 25,000-square-foot public park space that will be anchored by a large video screen.

He expects offerings such as Starbucks, Jersey Mike's and other eateries to draw people to a site that is two blocks from Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital and one of Johnson & Johnson's main buildings. It will also sit in front of a bus stop that has 9,000 rides daily, a block from a new classroom building with 3,000 seats and under enough residential units to house 500 students.

It's why Paladino believes the retail spaces, which will be operational by next August, could be a melting pot for the different segments of the city's population.

Taste of Jersey

If you're from somewhere in New Jersey — and you find yourself at Rutgers University's new retail shops on College Avenue next year — there's a good chance you'll feel right at home. That's because the shops will include eateries that are well-known in different parts of the Garden State: Jersey Shore favorites such as Jersey Mike's and Surf Taco, Princeton-based House of Cupcakes, Bella's Burger Shack from Basking Ridge and Honeygrow, a Philadelphia-based fast casual stir-fry and salad restaurant.

There also will be a new location for Grease Truck operator RU Hungry.

Christopher Paladino of New Brunswick Development Corp., which is building the complex, said that wasn't by design. Instead, it "became an opportunity" after Jason Pearson, the developer's broker, created a target list of retailers.

"I think we started to see the opportunity to really put in a mix of national chains, regional chains and local smaller enterprises that we think from Day 1 had a built-in audience," Paladino said, noting that 95 percent of Rutgers students are from New Jersey.

Devco also focused on ensuring there was no redundancy among the operators as way to encourage students, faculty and other patrons to visit multiple stores.

"We're trying to give some exclusivity to all of our tenants so they all do well," Paladino said.

"This could be a unique opportunity for somebody who works at Johnson & Johnson to actually sit down at an outdoor table and just happen to talk to some Rutgers kids," Paladino said. "You never know, when people who are doing interesting things have the opportunity to happen upon each other, what fascinating things can occur."

"So who knows what new business, what new relationship, what new idea may germinate in this space."

But he also said "that's just kind of where it starts," pointing to Devco's plans for programming the public space inside the U-shaped student housing and retail complex. The organization will have an annual operating budget of nearly \$500,000, which will fund live music, theater and other activities to help make the park a destination in the mold of Bryant Park.

And it will be anchored by a 350-square-foot LED video screen that he said will play everything from Rutgers football games to movies at night to international soccer matches on weekend mornings.

“I think the best advertising that we’ll do for our retailers is the advertising that will draw people there for events,” Paladino said.

Interaction also is a key theme for Rutgers’ new residential honors college, a red brick building that opened to students for the start of the fall semester. It’s home to some 20 faculty and staff members, such as the university’s dean of engineering, and is filled with common spaces to encourage collaboration among 550 of the school’s best and brightest students.

The space has done just that, Paladino said. In the first few weeks, students have done things such as organize a Bollywood film festival and knock on a dean’s door for a spontaneous serenade.

But, as much as anything else, having completed and opened the first piece of the new Rutgers campus allows Devco and the university to create more buzz for the rest of the project. Paladino noted that “there seems to be a growing desire by students and their parents for kids to be back on campus, (and) we think we’ve now created a thousand opportunities for that to be here in New Brunswick.”

“There’s a general excitement that the Rutgers college campus that really has not had any investment in it in 50 years is changing,” Paladino said. “We believe that we have reoriented the center of the Rutgers universe back to its historic roots in New Brunswick.”

E-mail to: joshb@njbiz.com

On Twitter: @joshburdnj