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UMDNJ breaks ground for child-health facility

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New Brunswick: University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey officials yesterday broke ground on a planned \$72 million biomedical research facility for diseases that affect children.

The Child Health Institute of New Jersey, part of UMDNJ-Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, will have 150,000 square feet of research laboratories, a pediatric clinical research center, academic offices and patient-care facilities. It will be located on Plum Street between French and Somerset Streets.

Describing the construction as “extremely timely,” Dr. Harold Paz, dean of the medical school, said it will give faculty much-needed space for innovative and cutting-edge research.

The institute will be linked physically with the Bristol-Myers Squibb Children’s Hospital at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital, according to a university spokeswoman.

“New Brunswick will be a beacon around the country and world for child health and research in child health,” said Paz.

The new research facility “offers hope for preventing and curing many chronic diseases affecting our greatest resource, our children,” said Dr. Stuart Cook, president of UMDNJ. He added the building was part of a \$518 million capital construction program by the university to enhance biomedical research and education in the state.

Research at CHINJ will focus on “translating basic research into effective therapies” for children in the city and state, Cook said.

The institute will provide researchers with state-of-the-art equipment to study the impact of the environment on the human genome and how that translates into abnormal cell development, said Paz. He added that this basic research could explain the causes of childhood diseases, including increasing rates of autism, asthma, diabetes and cancer among children, and might lead to successful treatments and cures.

The proposed pediatric clinical research center will provide “an opportunity for children to participate in clinical studies,” he added, noting that New Jersey has more than 200 pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies involved in making and testing new drugs.

The impetus for the child health institute came from “a strong interest at Johnson & Johnson and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to recreate the success the medical school had with the Cancer Institute of New Jersey,” according to Paz.

The cancer institute on Little Albany Street recently was designated a Comprehensive Cancer Center, the highest ranking awarded to cancer centers by the federal government.

Since CHINJ was conceived of more than five years ago, the University has raised in excess of \$40 million toward that goal, including at least \$8 million from the Federal government, almost \$4 million from the state, \$16 million from RWJF, \$6 million from J & J and millions more from private donors. The building should be completed in about two years, Paz estimated.

But the project is not without detractors.

Owners of the African Market on French Street, and other small businesses on the block of French, Plum, Scott and Somerset streets, complain they are being squeezed out by the development projects of large corporations and other entities.

“They are big guys trying to kick the little people out of the way,” Eunice Eshun, owner of African Market, which will be razed to build CHINJ, told the Home News Tribune in a recent interview.

New Brunswick Development Corp. Developer of the CHINJ project, said last week relocation efforts are progressing for the French Street shops.