

Rutgers project has potential to bolster business

\$295M effort could offer stimulus, halt brain drain

June 25, 2012 12:03PM

By Joshua Burd

As uncertainty lingers about the state's higher education system, Rutgers University is embarking on a sweeping redevelopment project at its College Avenue campus, in what is envisioned as the next step in the ongoing transformation of New Brunswick.

The \$295 million plan, which was formally unveiled last week, calls for building the first academic building on the campus in nearly 50 years, along with housing for 1,300 students, an honors college and a 30,000-square-foot outdoor plaza. At the helm is the nonprofit New Brunswick Development Corp., or Devco, the nonprofit behind several other major mixed-use projects under way in the Hub City.

"This will now make Rutgers one contiguous campus that runs for about 15 blocks from the New Brunswick train station all the way to the Raritan River," said **Christopher J. Paladino**, Devco's president.

The 800,000-square-foot project also calls for new facilities for the historic New Brunswick Theological Seminary, which owns most of redevelopment site. If completed, the project could help nearby businesses by allowing more students to live on the campus, rather than spread them out around the area, said **Glenn Patterson**, city's director of planning, community and economic development.

"It helps provide more economic development stimulus for that area, and hopefully that can lead to upgrading some of the retail along the Easton Avenue corridor," Patterson said. He added that the plaza could be a site that draws Rutgers students and faculty, but also workers from the city's downtown offices and health care institutions.

Paladino said the honors college will be a key feature to the city's business community.

"Keeping the best and the brightest in New Jersey in state is critical to the business community as a whole," he said. "But it's certainly important to companies like **Johnson & Johnson**, the law firms here in town and other businesses that are located here."

But the plan faces at least one hurdle: it is contingent on a \$90 million tax credit under the state's Urban Transit Hub program. In February, the Economic Development

Authority shelved about 15 mixed-use and residential projects that had applied for the program, citing the need to consider commercial projects as the agency approaches a \$1.5 billion cap on the tax credits.

An earlier version of the Rutgers project was among those that were frozen, but Paladino said he's optimistic the state will revisit its residential applications. He also said Devco's experience with Urban Transit Hub speaks for itself: the firm is nearing completion of its Gateway project in the city, which has leveraged a \$76.6 million state tax credit. The \$326 million project is packing new housing, office space and retail into the city's downtown.

"We just think it's important for us to be ready," Paladino said.

Devco and Rutgers have secured other financing commitments for the project if the tax credit is approved, he said. Construction could begin as soon as November.

The project, which was endorsed last week by Rutgers' board of governors, includes a 150,000-square-foot academic building for the School of Arts and Sciences. Also included: A residential honors college for 500 students, an 800-bed residence hall, and a vast park space with surrounding retail. **Antonio M. Calcado**, Rutgers' vice president for facilities and capital planning, said the project is "transformative to the university. It's a generational change."

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