Wayne college ups study options

Old theater being reborn as facility to boost access to degree programs and give WCCC needed space.

Karen Bouffard / The Detroit News

HARPER WOODS -- Workers are toiling 12 hours a day, six days a week to transform the former Beacon East Cinemas into a center of learning in time for fall classes.

Wayne County Community College is turning the shuttered 1970s movie house on Vernier into University Square, a 22,000-square-foot center to be shared with four-year institutions that want to offer courses locally. Classes start Sept. 8.

The university center will increase access to bachelor's and master's degree programs for students who want to go beyond a two-year community college degree, Chancellor Curtis Ivery said. It will also increase classroom and laboratory space for the Wayne County Community College district, which had to turn students away over the summer because of record-breaking enrollment, he added.

"We know there’s a huge need for this," Ivery said. "We have an underserved population of those who would seek a baccalaureate degree if they had better access.

"This would say to our students early on that there are other avenues, that they will not be locked out (of further education) after completing a two-year degree."

Grosse Pointe Park mother Doreen Thornton is taking classes at WCCC, and hopes to earn a counseling degree now that her children are grown. She said the availability of university courses so close to her home will make it easier for her to earn a four-year degree.

"That location is easy for me to get to," Thornton said. "With the price of gas, a lot of people are going to be interested in it. It gives people choices."

John Lichtenberg, chief marketing and enrollment officer for the 2,500-student Walsh College, a private Troy-based university offering accredited bachelor's and graduate degree programs, said the facility offers a possible venue for his institution.

"It looks like it's going to be a beautiful facility -- we just toured it last week," Lichtenberg said, adding Walsh College will conduct a feasibility study to decide if they should offer classes there.

"We want to see if there is a student base in that vicinity," Lichtenberg said. "Our gut tells us this is a
great location, especially with what it costs to commute these days."

University Square is part of a 10-year master plan approved by the Board of Trustees in 2001. Developer Harper Woods Properties, LCC, is footing the $6 million-plus cost of renovations. WCCC has agreed to a 25-year lease, and will invest about $400,000 in technology and equipment.

Similar centers have become a trend for community colleges nationwide, including Macomb County Community College, Ivery said.

Partners Michael Curis Jr. and Miles Gatland of Harper Woods Properties have been working feverishly to complete the facility, which will focus on science and technology. There will be four general-use classrooms and several "smart rooms" equipped for distance and interactive learning. There will also be a 100-seat lecture hall, a common area, and computer and science labs.

"We're cutting in windows all over the building and there will be a beautiful back-lit sign with Wayne County Community College across it," Curis said. "If you think about how a movie theater slopes, we had to actually fill in the floors to make them level -- that was the toughest part."

Ivery said the facility will have room for about 3,000 students. Summer enrollment increased from 11,500 in 2007, to 13,500 in 2008, and some students had to be turned away.

"We had record enrollment over the summer for the first time in our history," Ivery said. "You have students standing in line to get into nursing or any other health science program.

"When you have a poor economy, students tend to rush to school."

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