

MCC pushes outreach in area of planned campus

Meetings with High Falls area businesses address issues, build interest

By NATE DOUGHERTY

With a few years remaining and additional approval still needed before it can move its Damon City Campus to downtown's west side, Monroe Community College is ready to meet the neighbors.

During recent months college officials have made a concerted outreach to businesses in the area, giving tours of the new site and asking for input. In doing so, the college has built a sense of excitement among business owners, some of whom see the campus as the biggest development in the High Falls area in decades.

"We've been meeting with them and had a tour of the Kodak site in March, and we've answered questions and concerns," said Anne Kress, MCC president. "As with any major change in a neighborhood there are some concerns, but we've been impressed with how supportive the neighbors have been."

In December, the college's board of trustees recommended the downtown campus be moved from the Sibley Building on East Main Street to properties owned by Eastman Kodak Co. at State Street and Morrie Silver Way. The four connected buildings at the Kodak site provide a total of 560,000 square feet.

The board said the site best met the goals for MCC, giving it the ability to expand in the future and remain within the college's budget. Safety and security of the building also was a factor, as were accessible parking, public transportation and proximity to cultural offerings, MCC officials said.

The college still needs Monroe County to purchase the property. The county is conducting an environmental impact study on the proposed relocation.

Kress spoke with representatives of the High Falls Business Improvement District to articulate the college's plan for the space. The mostly enthusiastic response was tempered by questions about parking availability and public transportation, and MCC is working to address these concerns, she said.

"We talked about how the parking that comes with the site is already more than we have at the Sibley location, and there are still concerns about the bus drop-off on State Street that actually predate our decision to move there," Kress said. "There is a concern that there's not a lot of space on the sidewalk where the bus drops passengers off, and we're integrating those concerns into our talks with RGRTA."

John August, head of the High Falls Business Improvement District, said members are enthusiastic about having the space occupied and about the people the MCC campus will bring to the High Falls area.

Fina Mineo-Burroni, owner of Fina's Café & Catering on Mill Street, was given a tour of MCC's proposed site and said she was impressed with the space. Though she noted there are some mixed feelings about how the area will handle the increase in people and traffic, she said a pervasive sense of optimism exists among businesses in the High Falls area.

"On the whole I think everyone in High Falls is excited," Mineo-Burroni said. "It's a great part of the city that now many people know about. This will bring a breath of life to the area that the city has been trying to revitalize. Making it an entertainment district didn't work out, but this will really

have people coming and working here, and we know if people experience it they will see how great it is."

The college's downtown campus has grown considerably in recent years, with further growth expected, MCC officials said. Over the past 16 years, enrollment at the Damon City campus has grown to 2,900 students from 600.

James Staffieri, owner of Pizza Stop on State Street, said the new attention to the area could help raise demand and attract new businesses. He noted there are empty storefronts that could be filled.

"The problem with this side of downtown is there's not much here, and the reason for that is there's not many people here," Staffieri said. "This will be bringing more than 3,000 faculty and students. I've been here

more than 25 years, and this is the best thing that's happened since we've been here."

These organizations also will have opportunities for student internships, August noted.

"The college sent the message of what they want to do in career development, and with us being as close as we are we will have many businesses that tie in well," he said. "We look forward to employing their students and giving them some entry level into these businesses via internships."

After the uncertainty that came with Kodak's bankruptcy and the company's lack of communication, it is a nice change that MCC is keeping business owners so involved in the process, Mineo-Burroni added.

"It's an open feeling, like we're really involved in what's happening," Mineo-

Burroni said. "They could have done what other businesses have done, not talk to people about it and just come in. They're opening paths of communication and letting people ask questions over and over."

MCC plans to continue its outreach to business stakeholders in the area, having Emeterio Otero, Damon City Campus dean, attend regular meetings of the High Falls Business Improvement District. College officials also have met with the Urban League of Rochester about proposed housing developments in the area, Kress noted.

"We want to be located where people want us and we want the students to be welcomed," Kress said. "In the long term we envision MCC as a vibrant part of the High Falls community."

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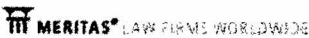
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