

HIGHER EDUCATION

WILM. UNIVERSITY PLANS NEW CAMPUS

Site in Brandywine Hundred on U.S. 202

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Wilmington University, a private career-oriented institution in New Castle, is embarking on the largest capital improvement program in its 46-year history with the purchase of 41 acres of undeveloped land on U.S. 202 and Beaver Valley Road in Brandywine Hundred.

Plans for the property, owned for decades by Woodlawn Trustees Inc. of Wilmington, call for three classroom buildings on 29 acres with work on the first 50,000-square-foot building expected to begin in about 18 months.

University president Jack Varsalona said the expansion will set the course for the university for the next 10 years.

To Irene du Pont Jr., a member of

the board of trustees and former board chairman, it's an amazing advance for an institution that began in an abandoned motel and gas station on U.S. 13 near Basin Road. When the school ran into financial difficulties in the 1970s, a du Pont family trust gave money to help turn the institution around.

"We're departing from past procedure of being a modest institution. Now, we're becoming a real university," said the du Pont family patriarch.

The project north of Wilmington is necessary because of the school's rapid growth, with student population growing at 7 percent a year for the past six years, Varsalona said. Today, enrollment stands at 19,116. Nationwide, the institution ranked as the fourth fastest-growing nonprofit university from 2002 to 2012, according to The Almanac of The Chronicle of Higher Education.

What's more, the demand is high among students for classes to be taught in Brandywine Hundred, Varsalona said. About 45 percent of the students live in North Wilmington zip codes, Varsalona said. For four years, the school has rented space for classrooms in Concord Plaza off Silverside Road and those are always the first to fill up, he said.

"It's at the point where it's burgeoning," said Laurie Bick, Wilmington University director of public relations.

When completed, the new campus could employ more than 150 people, including faculty and support staff. It would also generate jobs during the construction process. Varsalona declined to put a dollar estimate on the expansion, which calls for a maximum of three buildings of 50,000 square feet. Neither would he give the cost of the land, which is under contract with settlement pending any land use approvals.

But Varsalona said the deal is only possible because of the "goodwill" of Woodlawn Trustees, which took into consideration the value to the community of a university on the site in determining the price. The school had been looking to expand along the U.S. 202 corridor for five years, but was unable to find any suitable real estate.

"Whatever opened up, I went to look at it," Varsalona said. "When I saw the (Woodlawn) land, I was never as happy. It was a miracle."

Vernon Green, chief operating officer of Woodlawn Trustees, said they were able to work with Wilmington University on price because it's part of the company's mission to undertake projects that benefit the community. Proceeds from development are used to fund the company's land preservation and affordable housing mission, Green said.

"We feel that it is the most appropriate use for that land in today's market," Green said.

New Castle County Executive Tom Gordon, who is a graduate of the school, said based on preliminary plans, the development fits with the county's plan to upgrade the U.S. 202 corridor in appearance.

"They're committed to high-quality architecture," Gordon said. "It's going to look like a college campus. We want a beautiful campus that will be the first thing you see when you come into Delaware."

The university will launch a small capital campaign to pay for the project, Varsalona said.

"The university believes this to be a very important project for our students and the community," said former U.S. District Judge Joseph Farnan Jr., chairman of the board of trustees.

Varsalona and others declined to say if the Brandywine Hundred campus would become the main campus in the future.

"I think they're very proud of the gas station and the abandoned motel," du Pont said. "It's like being born in a log cabin in Illinois."

Varsalona said he will not tear down the original motel office and gas station that serve as administrative offices

now.

"It's important to remember where we came from," Varsalona said. "We have a philosophy of opportunity and those buildings remind us of how we must continue that philosophy."

Land use issues

Although the land is in the high-traffic corridor along U.S. 202, some believe it will meet with less community opposition than a previous plan for the tract which called for a shopping center and residences.

The university expects to file plans with New Castle County land use department within the next few months, Varsalona said. The land is already properly zoned for university use.

Eileen Fogarty, New Castle County general manager, said the plan would need approval for a major land development plan.

"We've only seen (plans) once and it was very, very conceptual. We would want to look at the plan, review and hear from the community," Fogarty said. "But in theory something like a university could be a good transition from the commercial development to the scenic and residential areas."

Robert Valihura, president of Council of Civic Organizations of Brandywine Hundred, said considering previous plans for the site, the Wilmington University project is a "tremendous opportunity for the community."

In 2008, Stoltz Real Estate Partners, a real estate organization based in Bala Cynwyd, Pa., submitted an \$80 million plan for the land that called for 264,000 square feet of retail and offices and 36 residences.

The year before, Woodlawn said Whole Foods Market Inc., a natural and organic foods supermarket, had expressed serious interest in leasing a more than 62,000-square-foot freestanding store in the center.

By 2010, Stoltz decided not to pursue the plan, but did not give a reason.

"The community as a whole would prefer to see it remain as a corn field," Valihura said. "But the community has understood that the land has been the focus of a sale by Woodlawn to pay for its low-cost housing in Wilmington. As between housing or university campus, the university campus makes sense in a number of ways."

Woodlawn Trustees was created in 1901 by Quaker philanthropist William P. Bancroft to preserve land along The Brandywine and develop land farther back from the creek as well-planned residential communities. Woodlawn communities on the west side of U.S. 202 include Alapocas, Woodbook, Sharpley, Edenridge and Tavistock. Land also was made available to community organizations, schools and churches. It has also been involved in commercial development along U.S. 202.

Since the 1970s, Woodlawn Trustees has been a tax-paying Delaware corporation whose proceeds from development are used to fund its preservation and affordable housing mission, Green said.

Two years ago, Woodlawn transferred 1,100 acres, which had been used for a wildlife preserve and public park, to the Rockford Woodlawn Fund, another Bancroft organization dedicated to land preservation, land enhancement (such as trails) and fighting urban blight. The Rockford Woodlawn Fund, in turn, sold the land to The Conservation Fund.

The purchase price of a little more than \$20 million was made possible by a donation from the Mount Cuba Center. In 2013, the land was donated to the National Park Service to become part of the First State National Monument, a new monument that includes the Dover Green, the New Castle Court House complex, and former Woodlawn property in the Brandywine Valley.

On U.S. 202 and surrounding roads, Valihura said the traffic generated by a university would better fit with the neighborhood traffic patterns than would housing. And classes typically start after rush hour, he noted.

"I think the campus has a chance to be a bright beacon for the community," Valihura said.

New Castle County Councilman Bob Weiner, whose district includes the Woodlawn land, said the university

campus is "much better use than a shopping center."

"Having said that, the land use department is going to carefully consider the wishes of the community and the councilman of the district. And I'm going to listen carefully to the community. The community will be at the table."

Traffic is an issue, as are hours of operation, architecture, lighting and setbacks, Weiner said. "The devil is in the details."

Early plans

Under the current proposal, the buildings will be located at least 100-feet back from both U.S. 202 and Beaver Valley Road, with the entrance off Beaver Valley Road.

The three-story buildings will face an existing pond. However, because the ground slopes down, only the top floors will be visible from the highway, Varsalona said.

"The objective is to remain in keeping with the beauty of the area," said university spokeswoman Bick.

Of the 41 acres, roughly 29 will be developed with buildings and parking. Twelve acres will remain open space with woods and trails, Bick said. An existing historic school house on the property will be restored to a one-room school house and preserved for educational purposes, perhaps as a museum.

Homsey Architects of Wilmington, which has designed the buildings for Wilmington University at the DuPont Highway campus in New Castle and in Dover, is handling the architecture.

Eldon Homsey said the firm's earlier buildings were Colonial Revival in style, but preliminary drawings for the Beaver Valley Road campus are more contemporary.

"It's respecting the area – trees," and natural areas, Homsey said.

Varsalona said: "It will not look like another office building."

Along the U.S. 202 front, plans are underway to build a high-quality architectural element made of Brandywine blue granite with the school's name that will be in keeping with the surrounding area.

"It will be dramatic and beautiful," Varsalona said.

Dramatic rise

For those who remember the original Wilmington College on DuPont Highway in New Castle, the Brandywine Hundred project is a remarkable achievement.

The college, which began at the site of a converted motel and gas station in 1968 with less than 200 students, was long considered an upstart institution for C students in a state dominated by the University of Delaware.

In the 1970s, financial difficulties threatened to shut down the school. It was then that the Crystal Trust set up by Irene du Pont, the late head of the Du-Pont Co. and father to the university trustee, came to the rescue with a \$3 million gift. With the money, the school was able to pay off debts and bring in Audrey Doberstein as president.

"She cleaned house with a good stiff broom," du Pont said.

Doberstein brought in Varsalona as second-in-command in 1987. He had been education advisor to former Gov. Pierre S. du Pont IV, development director at the University of Delaware and principal of Ursuline Academy.

Varsalona became university president in 2005 and is one of the highest paid presidents of a private, nonprofit institution. His 2011-12 compensation was more than \$1 million, according to the Chronicle of Higher Education.

Varsalona credits Irene du Pont with creating a winning culture at Wilmington University.

"His philosophy permeates the university," Varsalona said. "He taught everybody about inclusion, opportunity

and, financially, the way you run a business. You don't rely on gifts or state or federal money. You rely on an exceptional product and keep the tuition affordable. That's him."

Today, the school, which has a \$66 million endowment, has carved out a unique niche catering to career-oriented students. Roughly 65 percent of students are adult learners. Approximately 85 percent of existing students are already working.

It became a university in 2007 and now offers doctoral programs in business administration, education and nursing practice. It has master's degree programs in business, cybersecurity, computer network security and criminal justice, among others. The largest enrollment is in the College of Business, followed by the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences.

It does not take state or federal money, but is 98 percent driven by tuition. The rest comes from the book store, Varsalona said.

From the DuPont Highway campus, it has expanded to New Castle Corporate Commons and has classrooms in Middletown and Brandywine Hundred.

"Our goal is that you can get to us in 20 minutes from anywhere in New Castle County," Varsalona said.

It also has a campus in Dover and classrooms in Georgetown.

Varsalona says the university's rapid growth stems from its ability to offer a quality education at an affordable price, as well as flexible learning.

Based on a study by the school, the \$4,056 cost for 12 credits for both in-state and out-of-state students is less than the University of Delaware, Delaware State University, Goldey-Beacom College, Wesley College and Delaware College of Art & Design.

To Varsalona, the expansion is the perfect next step in the university's progress.

"Brandywine Hundred is a unique community. And it needs an institution that offers bachelor's, master's and doctorate degrees," he said. "We are convinced we can do this."

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A site for possible expansion of Wilmington University at the intersection of U.S. 202, Beaver Valley Road, and Ramsey Road.

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