

Federal grant puts Hammonton on track to host Stockton classes

By ROB SPAHR, Staff Writer, Press of Atlantic City | Tuesday, July 28, 2009 |

HAMMONTON - Students could begin taking Richard Stockton College courses in downtown Hammonton as early as this fall, thanks to \$250,000 in federal funding.

The new satellite location, about 20 miles west of the college's main campus, likely would focus on extended teacher education programs.

The House of Representatives awarded Hammonton \$250,000 on Thursday to help bring a Stockton educational center or campus downtown. It is the latest development in more than a year's worth of cooperative efforts between Stockton and town officials.

"Having a college like Stockton come in, from an educational standpoint, is huge for any community. But it is also great from a business perspective," said Mayor John DiDonato, who made a formal funding request to U.S. Rep. Frank LoBiondo, R-2nd, and U.S. Sens. Frank Lautenberg and Robert Menendez, both D-N.J., in March. "This will not only help the prosperity of our downtown, but it will also help the prosperity of the entire town."

DiDonato said the federal funding will help acquire several blighted former industrial sites downtown that are being sought for the project. DiDonato would not say which buildings are being targeted because negotiations are ongoing, but Stockton officials said last year they were targeting a building close to the train station because it would attract rail commuters.

The Galloway Township-based college already operates two satellite campuses at the Southern Regional Institute in Mays Landing and the Carnegie Library in Atlantic City. The state Department of Environmental Protection also has offered to lease Stockton 10 acres at the Villas Wildlife Management Area in Lower Township, Cape May County, for the creation of an environmental education center there.

"Hammonton is a vibrant community with a dynamic downtown that is rapidly developing as a center for arts and culture," Stockton President Herman J. Saatkamp Jr. said in a release. "Stockton is looking forward to partnering with Hammonton to support that development, enhance educational opportunities and to play a significant role in the region."

According to DiDonato, the total estimated cost of bringing a Stockton campus to town is between \$3 million and \$4 million, but he said he is optimistic that more federal dollars will be awarded to the project and that the \$250,000 could be enough to get Stockton programs started in Hammonton by the fall.

"This is just the beginning of it," DiDonato said. "Now that Congress supports this, it should make things easier for us. The U.S. Senate is also working on a similar appropriations request on our behalf."

LoBiondo said he would continue supporting the project until it is completed.

"Hammonton is moving forward with its efforts to revitalize downtown, which will attract new businesses and job opportunities to the region," LoBiondo said via e-mail. "This is a perfect example of the public-private partnership I've long advocated to grow our region's economy. I was proud to secure federal funding for this critical project and will continue to work with city officials, Stockton College and local businesses to complete this effort."