



**JOINT HEALTH SCIENCES CENTER
FOR
BIOMEDICAL RESEARCH**

Health sciences building to put a new face on Camden

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Diagonally across from the Walter Rand Transportation Center in Camden, a small strip of storefronts and restaurants attracts a steady stream of people in and out to get fried chicken, look at new cellphones, buy clothing.

The scene is set to be replaced with a different sort of bustle as state authorities last week granted preliminary approval to \$50 million for a new health sciences building. Stretching from Broadway west to Fifth Street and from Martin Luther King Boulevard south to Stevens Street, the Joint Health Sciences Center and related buildings are meant to bring together Rowan University, Rutgers-Camden, and other medical and educational institutions in the city for teaching and research.

The state Economic Development Authority gave preliminary backing last week to the funding for the project. "This is an important milestone. It's one of many steps we've got to take to bring the building to fruition," said Louis Bezich, the Cooper Health System official who is vice chair of the Rowan University/Rutgers-Camden Board of Governors.

The board, created as a compromise after a controversial proposal to merge Rutgers-Camden and Rowan University was dropped, is developing the project, will pay \$1.4 million toward it, and will operate the building.

Rutgers-Camden has committed to moving its Center for Computational and Integrative Biology to the planned four-story, 65,000-square-foot building. Rowan University has agreed to house its planned doctorate of occupational therapy program there. Board members also hope to involve other local colleges and health care organizations, including Camden County College, Cooper, and the Coriell Institute.

"In the end, this is about creating new knowledge through the research, it is about creating students who are qualified for emerging job opportunities for the area, it's about revitalizing the city of Camden," Bezich said. The board's first program has involved neither Rutgers nor Rowan: Its medical apprenticeship program links Camden high school students with Camden County College and the Camden Coalition of Health Care Providers.

After going through the program, students receive college credit and are guaranteed employment with local health-care groups. Officials describe a connecting-the-dots role for the board in creating pipelines to jobs for students.

"We've always said that this building is more than just an infrastructure project, it ultimately is about bringing to fruition this vision . . . to really build up our health-care expertise by educating our South Jersey population in fields that are in demand and that are growing in demand," said Kris Kolluri, chief executive of the joint board.

"And the second thing we're going to focus on in this center is to really establish a biomedical footprint in South Jersey and in Camden that rivals others in the region."

The planned Joint Health Sciences Center will give the board visibility in the city and ease the burden on Rowan and Rutgers-Camden by offering new lab, classroom, and office space.

It is also causing concern - among business owners currently operating at the location. "I worry about it," said Seok Moon, 45, who leases space for his cellphone store on the Broadway side of the block. "I don't want to move."

Moon said his landlord had told him about receiving a letter from the board; Moon hopes to remain in his space, which he opened five years ago and says makes good business.

Other parts of the block are empty, parking lots, or blank space.

Last week, the board authorized spending \$1.1 million to buy properties on the block owned by the Camden Redevelopment Authority, which constitute about 40 percent of the area being eyed for the project.

The remaining properties are split among six owners, and the board has begun reaching out to them to negotiate to acquire them.

Board members, including Camden Mayor Dana L. Redd, are cautious when discussing the property acquisition.

The board was given eminent domain power by the state Legislature, but Kolluri demurred when asked about using those powers, saying he was focused on good-faith attempts to buy the properties from the owners.

If the board can buy up the land it needs, have the Camden County Improvement Authority develop the project, and get the local universities and health groups working together to teach students and conduct research, it will be worth it, Kolluri said.

Sheila Davis, a longtime Camden resident and activist, lauded the building, telling the board last week it would change the education system in the city.

"Thank you for bringing a much-needed medical science center to the downtown Broadway corridor. As you know, education is the key to success. Many of our youth in our neighborhoods are really isolated, to think in one way," she said. "Now we can open up that opportunity for them to study and go into the medical and health science fields."