

'Health sciences' corridor to rise in Camden

The Inquirer

Jonathan Lai Posted: December 14, 2015 — 11:59 PM EST



Kris Kolluri (left), CEO of the Rowan University/Rutgers-Camden Board of Governors, with board members Bob Mortensen (center) and Louis Bezich. MICHAEL BRYANT / Staff Photographer

Leveling a city block in downtown Camden to build a "health sciences" campus, the Rowan University/Rutgers-Camden Board of Governors has begun flexing its muscle, making clear the scope of its mission and powers. Less than two years since its creation, the board also has funded diabetes research and steered federal grant money to training and jobs program.

The most tangible evidence is the demolition work on the block diagonally across from the Walter Rand Transportation Center - a block that the joint board has nearly finished acquiring, in part using eminent domain. From Broadway west to Fifth Street and from Martin Luther King Boulevard south to Stevens Street, the joint board has purchased or agreed to purchase most of the properties, including empty lots, abandoned buildings, and a small strip of restaurants and storefronts that attract steady business.

When the last pieces are acquired - one property owner is still negotiating, and the board is using eminent domain on some empty lots with absentee owners - the board will demolish the existing buildings to put up a Joint Health Sciences Center and related buildings.

The state has given preliminary approval for \$50 million in funding for the four-story, 65,000-square-foot project. Rutgers-Camden will move its computational biology program there, and Rowan has agreed to house its planned doctorate of occupational therapy program there.

Conceived as the compromise to quell controversy surrounding a proposed merger of Rowan and Rutgers-Camden, the joint board was specifically tasked with overseeing health sciences projects in Camden and recommending new programs.

"Everybody predicted two things about the board: One, that it would be strictly playing the role of trying to address the competing interests of the institutions, and, number two, that it would just be an organization that would sort of plod along and not get anything done," said Kris Kolluri, the CEO of the joint board.

But the board set a bigger mission from the start, he said. Top lawmakers rushed through legislation giving it eminent domain powers, among others, and board members from early on talked about working with other institutions in the city, including Camden County College, the Cooper Healthcare system, the Coriell Institute for Medical Research, and the public school district.

The joint board is focused on academics, economic development, and civic engagement, Kolluri said.

Some economic development will come from the new building but also from making job training and education more affordable, said board members, who point to projections showing increasing regional demand in health-care professions as the population ages.

"At the end of the day it's affordability and redevelopment," said Chad M. Bruner, the Gloucester County administrator who is a Rowan trustee and the school's appointee to the joint board.

Board members and local officials describe an "eds and meds" corridor forming in downtown Camden, stretching from the brick buildings of Rutgers-Camden to the glassy Cooper University Hospital and Cooper Medical School of Rowan University buildings. That science and medicine zone will include the Rutgers-Camden nursing building under construction at Fifth and Federal Streets and the joint board's health science campus just southeast of it.

"We take the broader view, that the board is tasked with more than just working with the two institutions," Kolluri said. "It is to leverage existing 'eds and meds' assets to build an economic platform."

That broader view has included creation of a medical apprenticeship and training program, backed by a federal grant, that pairs the Camden School District with Camden County College.

The joint board also has funded a diabetes research collaboration between Rutgers and Rowan professors, a legal-medical program between Cooper Medical School of Rowan University students and Rutgers-Camden law students, and sponsored a population health conference.

Bruner said he hopes the board can help keep students in the state.

"Generally, the students that stay here and go to school here remain here," he said. "We're losing out on engineers and doctors and a whole lot of different educational backgrounds to different states, and they may stay there."

Multiple partnerships will strengthen the region's educational offerings and help Rowan, Bruner said.

"As a Rowan trustee, you want to do everything you can for the Rowan side, but looking broader, it's really for the whole region, and if we can do that, and do what we're doing, we accomplish that mission," he said.

The medical assistant program that pairs the school district with Camden County College to provide training, college credit, and jobs, for example, could lead students to eventually transfer to Rutgers or Rowan.

"The bonus with Rowan and Rutgers is if you move people along a career ladder, maybe they don't get to a baccalaureate or master's degree in four or six years, but maybe it's the 10-year plan for that person, and you really open doors for them," said Camden County dean Anne McGinley, who oversees nursing, health sciences and human services.

McGinley credited the joint board with putting "the right people in the room" to come up with cooperative programs.

"There's a paradigm shift that is happening, right? It is no longer viewed as, 'Well, why are you stepping into my territory?'" Kolluri said. "For the first time, people are actually sitting around the table and saying, 'Have you thought about this idea?' "