

Court fight over proposed health campus

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(Photo: Photo provided)

CAMDEN - A court fight is under way over the development of a health sciences campus here.

The Rowan University-Rutgers Camden Board of Governors filed eminent-domain lawsuits Monday to force the sale of eight storefronts on the 200 block of Broadway.

The targeted sites are on the block's eastern side, across from a cleared area where the board plans to build a \$70-million, 100,000-square-foot complex.

The board wants to develop a second phase across the street, where it already has bought two properties through negotiations, said Kris Kolluri, the panel's chief executive officer. He has not disclosed specific plans for the block's eastern side.

"Our objective is to build a comprehensive 'eds and meds' corridor," Kolluri said of the project, which would extend between Martin Luther King Boulevard and Stevens Street from 5th Street to 6th Street.

The storefronts' owners have held the properties for decades in the hope of one day seeing a revival in downtown Camden, said their attorney Timothy Duggan of Lawrenceville.

Duggan's clients "understand the need for redevelopment" but are "frustrated" at having to sell their land before the revitalization occurs.

"Unfortunately, we're fairly far apart on value," Duggan said.

According to the eminent domain suits, the board has offered a total of \$1.9 million to In Chung Choi and Young Ai Choi, who own storefronts that hold two clothing shops, a check-cashing business, a cell-phone store, a jewelry shop and a pharmacy.

Tax records indicate the Medford couple has owned property on the Broadway block since 1981.



A planned health complex on Broadway in Camden has run into resistance from property owners. (Photo: *Courier-Post file photo*)

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The board also offered \$710,000 to Woo Suk Lee and Kyoung Hee Lee, whose property houses a wig store, and \$310,000 to a relative, Daniel J. Lee, the landlord for Crown Fried Chicken. The Lees, who live in Voorhees, have owned property on the block since 1991, according to tax records.

Under a 2013 law, the joint board is charged with "creating a long overdue residential campus (in Camden) and expanding a health sciences campus anchored by the new Cooper Medical School of Rowan University."

The law also authorized the board to use eminent domain — allowing it to acquire property at a price set by court-appointed commissioners.

The lawsuits, filed Monday in Superior Court, Camden, would allow the board to take possession of the properties while a judge oversees a process to determine their value.



Property owners on the 200 block of Broadway in Camden have balked at offers to sell their storefronts to make way for a health sciences campus. (Photo: Courier-Post)

"We are using the tools available to acquire property," said Kolluri.

"We have always treated the property owners and the tenants with respect throughout this process," he added.

The board has said it will offer relocation assistance to tenants on the block's eastern side, including some who moved across the street from areas razed for the pending construction.

The project's first phase will hold a research center for use by Rowan and Rutgers-Camden. An adjacent building will hold medical training programs for Camden County College and facilities for use by the nearby medical school.

The buildings will share a lobby and a cafe.

The second phase is expected to include a health sciences library, classroom and labs for use by the two universities, Camden County College and Rowan College at Gloucester. It will also offer a research incubator, as well as retail, office and research space, according to the board.

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