

GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY: Campus graduates to big role downtown

by Andrea Jones

Standing in the courtyard of his university's massive student housing complex, Georgia State University President Carl Patton giddily ticks off a few facts.

Nearly 2,000 students will call University Commons home when it opens Friday, and many more are clamoring to get in. The \$168 million mega-structure on Piedmont Avenue came in "early and under budget" and is, he says, the largest privately funded student housing project in the country.

It's just the latest coup for GSU, the urban university that has gobbled up downtown Atlanta.

In recent years, the school's campus has been a maze of building cranes and construction activity, all part of a decades-long, two-tiered \$1.5 billion expansion that is changing not only the school, but the city itself.

By 2015, Patton says, GSU plans to house 20 percent of its estimated student population of 36,000 on campus, a sea change for an institution founded in 1913 as a night commuter school for busy professionals.

Putting students on downtown sidewalks, making GSU "a part of the community rather than apart from it," has been Patton's mantra for years.

It is a goal the urban planner put into play shortly after he arrived on campus in 1992, with the \$14 million renovation of the Rialto Theatre, which for years had sat vacant and boarded up on the corner of Luckie and Forsyth streets.

In following years, GSU built a student center, a recreation center and a \$45 million, four-story classroom building.

The school moved its schools of business, music and public policy into the historic Fairlie-Poplar District.

Veteran Atlanta developer John Aderhold said the school is bringing downtown back.

Aderhold, a well-known Georgia Tech booster, helped fund Georgia State's classroom building, a "Christmas, birthday and anniversary gift," for his wife, Helen, a GSU alum.

Last fall, the school broke ground on a \$142 million science park on the corner of Decatur Street and Piedmont Avenue near Grady Memorial Hospital, a 3.2-acre site that will soon replace its red clay with a teaching laboratory and research laboratory.

The state kicked in \$40 million for the park, one of the few u p c o m i n g projects that will use public funds, Patton said.

The other \$100 million was raised in private donations.

In addition to new construction, GSU has

been busy snapping up existing buildings downtown.

The school's private foundation bought the white 26-story SunTrust building on Park Place, overlooking Woodruff Park, last fall for \$52 million and recently bought Citizens Trust Bank, adjacent to the new housing complex on Piedmont, this year.

The bank buildings will be used for desperately needed office space and the eastern portion of the SunTrust site will eventually be developed as a professional education center that will house Georgia State's colleges of law and business, Patton said.

Still, the bank building purchases could have some unintended consequences.

The buildings will likely eventually move off Fulton County's tax rolls, which could shift some of the burden of the expansion to taxpayers, said Burt Manning, the county's chief assessor.

Unlike private companies, state agencies don't pay property tax.

"When you start buying major buildings, it's a big deal," Manning said. "Most of the times, we are seeing them go from one company to another. When you get the state or the county or the Board of Regents involved, you lose that revenue stream."

But considering the county's \$135 billion tax digest, the buildings won't make a huge dent in the tax base, he said.

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University Common at Georgia State University

Architect Ray Kimsey, president of Niles Bolton Associates, the firm that designed GSU's new dormitory, said the benefits of the construction far outweigh the tax trade-offs.

"The reality is that the mission is so vital and the stability is so critical, the presence of Georgia State feeds the development," he said.

"They are creating a vital downtown area."

For Patton, each construction project brings the university closer to his vision for the institution: becoming a place where people learn and live, instead of a campus of commuters.

As he walked down one of the long hallways at the Commons, where students will soon move into apartments any college kid would envy, he stopped and took a sniff.

"I just love that new building smell."