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Framingham State expands, upgrades on-campus housing

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A sketch of the new dormitory being built at Framingham State. Construction began in early November. (Courtesy: Framingham State College)

By Matt Rocheleau, Globe Correspondent

Work is underway on a \$47-million, 410-bed dormitory at Framingham State College, one of several state schools taking advantage of what has become an opportune time to improve existing facilities – like housing, dining and parking centers – or add new ones.

The Massachusetts State College Building Authority (MSCBA), which funds the construction of such revenue-funded student activity facilities at the state’s nine public colleges, is “guardedly optimistic” that they will soon receive an improved bond rating thanks to recently passed legislation, said MSCBA executive director Edward Adelman.

Also, the MSCBA is financially independent of state government and, consequently, not impacted by state budget cuts; meanwhile, the economic downturn has allowed for more competitive construction prices.

By financing through the authority, Framingham State learned last week it expects to save around \$3.6 million in interest costs on the residence hall project, which will lower the dorm’s originally projected room and board rates by around \$150 annually per student, said Dale Hamel, the college’s senior vice president of administration, finance, and technology.

“We have a very successful operation with the MSCBA,” Hamel said.

“I think this is a very good example of how government does work,” he added, referring to the MSCBA’s financing along with legislation passed at the state level, supported by Speaker of the House Robert DeLeo and Policy Advisor for Education and Local Aid Tom Moreau, to strengthen the authority’s credit.

Designing new buildings and renovating existing facilities is built based on long-term need; however, the projects also come at a time when public colleges nationwide are seeing [increased demand in admissions](#).

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“Being able to build at a time when we are seeing such high enrollment rates is very, very good timing,” said Adelman. “However, we are not building [or renovating] facilities we cannot fill ... These projects are based on long-term demand.”

During the recession, schools have watched enrollment climb to record or near-record levels recently, as more high school graduates avoid the dismal job market to continue their educations, older adults return to school to upgrade their résumés, and many people are seeking more-affordable avenues to higher education.

Framingham State has seen a 10 percent increase in freshman enrollment during the fall semester.

Work started on the 125,000 square-foot, four-floor dormitory in November. The new building, which has not yet been named, will increase the current 1,500 on-campus student population by around 160. The other 250 beds will go to students currently residing in the 48-year-old O’Connor Hall, which will be converted into office and academic space after the new residence hall is complete during summer 2011.

In preparation for the additional students who will move in during fall 2011, Framingham State is also planning a \$2.5 million upgrade, through MSCBA financing, to the snack bar area of its recently renovated dining hall, also financed by the authority, Hamel said.

“If you’re housing more students, you have to feed more students as well,” he said.

The college recently completed a \$12-million multi-phase renovation to the D. Justin McCarthy College Center, added parking, and in summer 2008, the college finished a five-year, \$60-million upgrade to the campuses’ five existing residence halls, all through the MSCBA.

A project mainly funded by the town, along with a \$300,000 contribution from Framingham State, has improved lighting, sidewalks and crosswalks along State Street and Maynard Road, said Hamel.

And, he said the school is also hopeful to receive federal stimulus funding for a solar panel installation project on the college center and athletic facility.

The MSCBA issues revenue bonds, and manages the design and construction of revenue-funded student activity facilities for the state’s colleges. Revenue generated from those buildings through meal plans, rent, and other student-paid fees, is used to pay back construction debt over time.

The Massachusetts College of Art and Design in Boston is building a \$60 million, 500-bed dormitory, while the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts in North Adams, Bridgewater State, Fitchburg State, and Westfield State are each involved in MSCBA-financed repair and renovation projects of their own, Adelman said.

However, the authority is not involved with the construction of administration or academic buildings; those are owned by the Commonwealth and paid for by tuition and tax revenue.

So, with the state cutting its funding to many areas, including to the operational budgets of public colleges, keeping up with educating the increased number of enrollees can be more difficult than finding new ways to house and feed them.

To accommodate the growing student population – around 3,200 students enrolled in day classes and another 2,500 in the evening program – Framingham State has filled once-vacant slots during its daytime schedule, and will continue to add more online courses and more hybrid courses, which are taught partially online and partially in the classroom, Hamel said.

The school has avoided making cuts to faculty, though some have been asked to teach additional courses.

An official ground breaking for the new dormitory at Framingham State will be held in the spring.



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