

Midtown expects to boom with new HACC campus

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Harrisburg's midtown neighborhood is about to become a miniature college town.

Beginning Monday, with the opening of Harrisburg Area Community College's campus at Third and Reily streets, the neighborhood's small shops, mom-and-pop eateries and quaint townhouses will get an injection of up to 700 college students.

That number is expected to grow to 2,500 in the next several years.

It's a sea change for the midtown, known mostly for the Broad Street Market and the Midtown Cinema art-house theater.

"It's really hard to imagine," said Eric Papenfuse, owner of the Midtown Scholar Bookstore. "We're going from a streetscape of 50 people to 2,000 to 3,000 people. It's almost impossible to envision that. It's a major transformation of the neighborhood, and it's exciting."

Papenfuse said he's making expansion plans, and he's betting other area business owners are doing the same.

"We're going from nothing to everything in a very short period of time," he said.

For developer Powers & Associates of Harrisburg, which fronted the \$17 million to turn the former Evangelical Press building into a first-class facility for HACC's industrial technology trade programs, the project is the first step in a master plan to remake the midtown.

The company plans this fall to break ground on a 65,000-square-foot office and retail complex across Reily street from the 130,000-square-foot HACC building.

That four-story building would boast first-floor retail shops, with a pizza shop to and coffeehouse possible. Office space on the upper floors might become home to branch sites for other colleges, where two-year HACC grads could work on four-year degrees.

In addition, Powers has reached a deal to buy the building that houses the Midtown Cinema at 250 Reily St., while other projects will include building or renovating residential housing, with a total of 1 million square feet of construction possible.

"If I am a professor here and someone builds a nice townhouse in the neighborhood, I might consider moving here," said Powers' chief operating officer, John Tierney, explaining the synergy the company sees driving midtown development.

To house the students expected to flock to the area, Mayor Stephen R. Reed has said the city will issue a request for proposals from private companies to build and lease as many as 300 apartment units. This is separate from the Powers project.

HACC is hoping to grow along with the neighborhood. The new building more than doubles HACC's presence in the midtown, where it had operated its Community Center for Technology at North Fourth and Harris streets. That site will be renovated and expanded, while HACC's building and trades programs move to the new facility.

"Once people see the inside of this building, they are going to be astounded," said Edward Burns, chairman of HACC's technologies department. "The lab areas are almost twice the size of what we had."

If you see students climbing onto the roof, don't worry; it's all part of the HVAC course. A collection of air-conditioning condensers on the building's roof is actually a classroom, where students will have to climb up and work.

"The lab is on the roof, just like in the real world," added Burns, who teaches an HVAC course. "Students will go up the side of the building. If they can't go up a ladder, they might want to consider another field."

Amid the clatter of construction, residents have been relatively supportive, said Dave Robertson, president of the neighborhood group Friends of Midtown.

But there have been two overriding concerns: the area's relatively scarce parking and a huge mound of topsoil in a lot next to the cinema, he said.

"The renovation itself is great to see," Robertson said. "It's definitely a very, very positive thing to have people coming here to learn, but there have been some issues."

Powers officials said the parking and the pile are related, as the dirt is being recycled from as many as 10 parking lots the company is developing for HACC students and staff.

Powers promises to remove the soil as soon as possible and suggests that the solution to the parking concerns will be a city-built garage.

Meanwhile, neighborhood groups are pushing for residential parking permits, a system that exists elsewhere in Harrisburg.

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MOVE MONEY

State Sen. Jeffrey Piccola, R-Susquehanna Twp., and state Rep. Ron Buxton, D-Harrisburg, are to announce today a \$1.5 million state commitment to the HACC Midtown campus. The money, from the state's Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program, will cover some of the \$17 million in renovation costs for the HACC building at Third and Reily streets. TO LEARN MORE: www.hacc.edu/.

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