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A banner image with a teal overlay. It shows a school bus on the right with the word 'SCHOOL' partially visible. On the left, there is a circular sign with 'USA' and a person's hand holding a pen. The text 'School Zone' is centered in large white font.

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UCF wins approval for downtown Orlando campus



The Florida Board of Governors on Wednesday, March 2, 2016 approved the downtown Orlando UCF campus.



By **Gabrielle Russon** · **Contact Reporter**

State board supports downtown Orlando UCF campus.

MARCH 2, 2016, 6:45 PM

UCF's plan to build a campus in downtown Orlando won a key approval Wednesday, a decision hailed as historic for the school and city.

School and local leaders then turned almost immediately to the next hurdle: getting \$20 million for the project into the state budget that will survive a Gov. Rick Scott veto. He killed funding for the project last June.

“We’re going to take about 10 minutes and celebrate, and then we’re going to move on to making sure the money is contained in the budget and the governor gives it final approval,” Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer said. “I have great confidence we’re in a very good position to finish this off.”

UCF aims to open the school in fall 2018; it would serve about 7,700 students in the first year.

“This is a big day,” UCF President John Hitt said after the Florida Board of Governors’ 14-2 vote for the campus. “While we didn’t have a unanimous vote in favor, it was clear we had an overwhelmingly positive response.”

Wednesday’s meeting was in stark contrast to one in November, when Hitt asked to delay a Board of Governors vote because there were too many questions to address.

On Wednesday, several board members applauded UCF for asking for less state money on its second attempt and for raising \$16 million in donations so far, which showed a commitment from the community.

In front of a packed crowd of about 200 in a meeting held on UCF’s main campus, Hitt and other school and community leaders pitched the project for about an hour, followed by a brief discussion by the state board.

“A year ago we were faced with what I considered to be a very easy decision ... I would have voted no,” said board chair Tom Kuntz of Winter Park. “I think what has been shown to us today and over the course of the year is the real need for this project.”

But Dean Colson, one of the two board members who voted against it, warned about staff concerns that the downtown campus could fail to meet enrollment projections. He said the state should be skeptical of building new campuses, especially since there are other existing needs, such as UCF’s desire for a science building.

“Although UCF is a very good university with a terrific president and outstanding community support, I don’t believe UCF is a great university,” Colson said. “Building

another campus is not a step forward in becoming great.”

In a news conference later, Hitt said he and Colson disagree on what makes a metropolitan state university great.

He said Colson was implying great schools are “elitist” institutions that focus more on research, which he called old-fashioned.

In June, Scott vetoed \$15 million earmarked for the downtown campus, saying the project hadn’t gone through the proper approval process with the Board of Governors, which oversees state universities.

Critics said the veto was political payback against Senate President Andy Gardiner, an Orlando Republican who is a staunch downtown campus supporter. Gardiner feuded with the governor over expanding health care to the poor.

In Tallahassee on Wednesday, Gardiner said he was pleased with the approval. State money for the campus isn’t part of the budget yet but could be added in final negotiations before the Legislature adjourns next week, he said.

“Our community has been rallying the idea of a downtown campus for years,” Gardiner said. “A downtown campus will be a huge economic generator for our community.”

UCF is asking for the \$20 million from the state after promising to raise \$20 million in donations and pulling \$20 million from its own budget to build the \$60 million academic building downtown.

The school would immediately relocate several academic programs in fields such as a social work, legal studies, communication and health-related programs from the main campus and could move others in future years.

Valencia College, a partner in the project, would work with private developer Craig Ustler to build its culinary and hospitality programs downtown.

Advocates said the downtown campus has the power to change the low-income Parramore neighborhood where it will be located.

“Education, I do believe, is the key out of poverty,” said Orlando City Commissioner Regina Hill, whose district includes Parramore. “Now I see lawyers. I see politicians. I

see those chefs. Now lives will be transformed.”

Staff writer Gray Rohrer contributed to this report. grusson@orlandosentinel.com or 407-420-5470

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