

KANNAPOLIS - After two years of planning and wrangling with financing, Castle & Cooke will break ground for the Rowan-Cabarrus Community College building at the North Carolina Research Campus.

It will be the first construction at the research campus since the Core Research Laboratory and the UNC and N.C. buildings were completed last summer.

The groundbreaking set for May 29 at 10 a.m.

RCCC signed a lease agreement with Castle & Cooke in March, but the campus developer has been working since then to secure the final agreements for financing the building.

Like the agreement with the UNC system, RCCC will lease the building for 20 years, then will revert to state ownership. RCCC will also get about \$3 million a year from the state for leasing and operations.

This step paved the way to construct the \$26 million classroom and laboratory building to house RCCC's biotechnology degree programs.

The building will feature a flex lab, where students will learn lab procedures in an industry-standard environment. It will take about 15 months to get the building constructed and open.

"It is still our goal to be in this building by fall semester 2010," said RCCC spokesman Jeff Lowrance. "Our biotechnology programs will start up in earnest this fall, so we hope to have students in the building as quick as possible."

In November 2008, Duke Energy gave RCCC a \$250,000 grant to purchase equipment for its new education building at the research campus.

The construction delay of the building has only been exacerbated by the worsening economy. Castle & Cooke hasn't been able to get financing for the building, RCCC President Carol Spalding said in February.

This semester, RCCC has 5,978 students enrolled — 900 more students than the Spring 2008 semester. It is the largest semester enrollment increase since Pillowtex closed, college officials have said.

RCCC also has reactivated its foundation to start asking for private contributions for programs and equipment.

Spalding said they are looking for a part-time foundation director to get the fundraising effort going. But the funding request effort comes when legislators are facing a \$2 billion budget shortfall.

Cabarrus County, which is a primary source of funding for the community college, has cut \$58,600 from its allotment of about \$1.9 million this year.

RCCC has already cut \$1.2 million out of its budget this year, as per state directives, and is following new state spending cut directives from Gov. Bev Perdue.

Lowrance said RCCC is expecting their enrollment numbers to grow again in the 2009-10 school year, similar to the growth seen this year.

With the accelerated closing of the Philip Morris plant in July, Lowrance said school officials expect to see those laid-off workers in the classrooms once their severance benefits kick in.

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