

Rowan seeks to turn Glassboro into a traditional college town

By GEOFF MULVIHILL
Associated Press

■ Student apartments and more vendors are planned for the Gloucester County campus.

GLASSBORO—Rowan University has already transformed itself from a little-known southern New Jersey commuter college into a top-tier university where students are looking to move onto campus.

Now, its hometown is trying to transform itself, too — into a traditional college town.

Work began last week on Rowan Boulevard, a brand-new thoroughfare designed to link the town and school. The idea is to create a neighborhood that provides near-campus, university-managed housing, along with restaurants and shops intended to attract students and non-students.

Many college towns have this kind of neighborhood on the edge of campus. To name a few: Princeton's Nassau Street, Minneapolis' Dinkytown and The Drag in Austin, Texas.

But until now, Glassboro — a town of about 19,000 located 15 miles south of Philadelphia — and its students have done without.

"We have an opportunity to make this a real college town," said Donald Farish, the university's president.

Farish said the school's evolution into a more traditional liberal arts college has made the bold development plan possible.

Plans left incomplete

Until 1992, the school was known as Glassboro State College and drew students mostly from southern New Jersey.

The state school used a \$100 million gift from industrialist Henry Rowan to become more competitive. It added an engineering school, expanded and renamed its business school, and catapulted into the top tier of masters-granting institutions in the North in U.S. News & World Report's rankings.

The school has not been able to complete all its big plans. For instance, it has abandoned an idea hatched three years ago to build an additional campus outside the downtown around a stadium for a Major League Soccer team and commercial development.

But Rowan has been successful in building a bigger residential-college culture.

From 1998 through last year, total enrollment grew from just less than 9,500 to nearly 10,300. The number of full-time students increased even more — from fewer than 6,500 to more than 8,000.

The number of students living on campus jumped during that time, too, from about 2,400 to 3,100. The university says another 1,500 are what it calls "resimuters" — students who live within a mile of campus.

Current options few

Downtown Glassboro has pizzerias, Chinese takeout, barber shops, some bars and a single fledgling coffee shop. But it doesn't have the feel of a college town. With some empty storefronts and low-end businesses such as a discount beauty supply shop, it doesn't feel like a thriving downtown either.

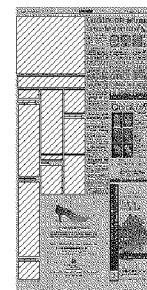
Senior Lauren Fleming, an English and writing arts major from Egg Harbor Township, said the social options in town are so unappealing that students often head to Philadelphia when they want to go out.

But they might stay in town if there was more to do, she said.

That's part of the mission of the \$300 million Rowan Boulevard development, which has been in the works for about a decade. The project is scheduled to be completed sometime in 2012 — a goal its developers say remains on target despite the recession.

Most of the money in the development comes from investors, although the state and federal governments are paying more than \$3 million for the road itself.

The Borough of Glassboro bought 26 acres between downtown and Rowan and sold it to a land developer, Sora Holdings LLC. Last week, crews worked to raze the last of 60 buildings — mostly houses, including several fraternity houses — that stood on the tract. The cleared land allows Sora to create a new urban area



in a city from scratch, rather than merely filling in the gaps in an existing business district.

The plan

The first phase of student apartments is slated to open in time for the fall semester. By the beginning of the 2010-2011 school year, officials hope to have enough apartment housing for 884 students. Rowan has a contract to lease the apartments for the next 30 years — a deal that was key for Sora to be able to get loans for other parts of the project.

A Holiday Inn Express and a Barnes and Noble — which would become the official university bookstore — have already been announced as tenants. Sora says dozens of other stores and dining spots will open in buildings designed to look like they were constructed between 1870 and 1930. Apartments will hover above the businesses.

A new town square is also part of the project, which officials say will provide hundreds of jobs and increase the community's property tax revenue.

Opinions on the idea

Rowan President Farish said the project will not only provide activities for students and make the school more attractive, but it also could create more study time. Now, he says, students who want to work often have to drive to jobs elsewhere. With jobs at urban stores and restaurants, he said, it will become possible for them to work close by without the need of a car.

Joseph Getz, a consultant for the project, said the refurbished town should even attract non-students. It will make Glassboro the only big downtown shopping and arts area within a 10-mile radius, a region where nearly 350,000

people live.

Colleen Henry, who opened Flowers by Design last year in downtown Glassboro, said she welcomes the increased traffic the new road and strip of businesses could bring — even if a new flower shop goes into one of the new spaces. “A little competition doesn’t hurt,” she said.

Not everyone in town is sold on the idea. Butch Cox, a 66-year-old barber who once ran for mayor of Glassboro and intends to run again, said he expects taxpayers will end up paying more for the project than is planned.

“It’s a roundabout way of running good people out of town and taking their properties,” Cox said.



Associated Press photo by Mike Derer

Rowan University is trying to transform its hometown of Glassboro, a town of about 19,000, into a traditional college town. The university's president says a bold development plan is possible because the school is evolving into a more traditional liberal arts college.