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Gov. Deal's proposed budget has funding for Armstrong, Georgia Southern construction plans

January 23, 2017



Armstrong State University provided this rendering of a proposed new building for its College of Health Professions. In his proposed budget for fiscal year 2018, Georgia Gov. Nathan Deal has earmarked about \$22 million to build the facility and renovate another building on campus. (Rendering provided by Armstrong State University)

Georgia Gov. Nathan Deal's proposed budget for fiscal 2018 includes millions of dollars to develop a new health sciences facility at Armstrong State University and a new engineering and research facility at Georgia Southern University.

As of Wednesday, a process to consolidate the two schools, which are about 50 miles apart, is underway – news that so far has been met by vocal resistance from Armstrong students, staff and alumni. University System of Georgia officials, while proposing consolidation to the system's Board of Regents, said they wanted to expand the engineering and health care programs currently offered by the two schools.

In Savannah, efforts to expand Armstrong's health care programs are not new. Last year, the school's request for \$22.6 million to construct a new building for its College of Health Professions did not make it onto Deal's proposed budget.

It's important to note that the budget has not been adopted. Georgia's legislators must review the governor's recommendations and come up with an appropriations bill that passes both chambers of the General Assembly before being signed into law. State Rep. Ron Stephens, R-Savannah, said a final budget probably won't be voted on until the last day of the legislative session this spring. He did, however, say he thinks it is unlikely the funding will disappear.

"It's there," Stephens said of the funding.

Project at Armstrong

Earmarked in the proposed budget is \$22 million to build a new “health professions academic center” at Armstrong and renovation of the school’s Ashmore Hall, which is primarily used for classes in nursing and other health studies. About 40 percent of Armstrong’s graduates go through some type of health sciences program – the most of any public university in the state.

In a statement sent to the newspaper, Armstrong’s director of government and community relations, Pete Hoffman, said the new building will provide “interprofessional health care education to meet the growing needs of area hospitals and health care providers.”

Asked how consolidation might affect the project, Stephens said he thought it would put construction “in high gear.”

“I think a lot of stuff from Georgia Southern is going to be shifted to Savannah and we’re probably going to become a mecca for health training,” Stephens said.

There are still many unanswered questions about how consolidation will affect academic programs at the current universities and how commutes between Savannah and Statesboro will be worked out – issues among others that are sure to come up at town hall sessions set for both campuses Thursday.

In terms of how the projects might affect the economy, Savannah Area Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Bill Hubbard said he hoped the projects, if they move forward, would have a positive economic impact in terms of construction and be an asset for academic programs.

“I think things like this are measured in the long-term gain of being able to educate more students,” Hubbard said.

Projects at Georgia Southern

In Statesboro, the proposed budget includes \$5 million for design, construction and necessary equipment for the renovation of the Hanner Complex, which houses Georgia Southern’s health and physical education programs and is linked to Hanner Fieldhouse, which is home to the school’s basketball and volleyball programs.

The goal there is to renovate more than 8,000 square feet of unfinished space that was once an indoor pool. Plans are to divide the area into spaces for research on biomechanics, motor control and human performance research. There are also safety and accessibility upgrades planned for the Fieldhouse.

Another \$4.9 million is suggested for planning and design of a new Center for Engineering and Research. Georgia Southern wants to build a four-story, 157,000-square-foot facility that includes research labs, conference rooms, classrooms and offices.

“These spaces will be designed to accommodate a range of projects from large manufacturing research to small electronic projects and will be equipped with cranes, hoists and rigging equipment,” according to a document from the school’s public information office outlining the proposed expansions.

In a statement provided to the newspaper, Georgia Southern Vice President of University Advancement and External Affairs Trip Addison said he did not think the consolidation process would impede those projects.

“We fully support the governor’s budget recommendation of these two projects plus the project for Armstrong,” Addison said. “The consolidation has no impact and we will work hard in support of all three.”

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