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Butler Tech targets health with campus

Business Courier of Cincinnati – by James Ritchie, Staff Reporter

Armed with a new study of key health care leaders, officials at the **Butler Technology and Career Development Schools** are pushing ahead with plans for a new West Chester Township campus, focused on biomedical training.

The project has an expected cost of \$30 million to \$35 million.

Despite the worst economy in memory, officials say it's a good investment because health care employment will only grow in coming years. Area health care leaders agree: They say the move is exactly what's needed to help ensure a sufficient work force.

Butler Tech CEO Robert Sommers said construction could begin on the project, which will include a 400-student high school, within the next two years.

"What we're hearing from the community is, 'When can you build and how quickly can you open to meet our needs?'" Sommers said. "It's been one of those ideas that seems fairly simple to move forward with."

Boom in Northern suburbs

Butler Tech, which has a \$50 million annual budget, recently completed a study of community needs. The northern suburbs are experiencing a health care boom as their population grows, with such players as the **Health Alliance, Premier Health Partners, Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center** and **TriHealth** all having built facilities in the area in recent years.

Some of the trends highlighted in the study include a need for graduates with technical skills in health care, a need for schools to stay abreast of innovations as new skill requirements and career opportunities emerge, and a likelihood that the home health care industry will expand significantly. A current lack of graduates who have had extensive hands-on experience was also noted.

Carol King, the top executive at the newly built **West Chester Medical Center**, said she anticipates having openings for many graduates in coming years. Her hospital has about 560 employees, enough to care for about 40 patients a day. But the hospital, which opened in May, has 162 beds, and King is focusing on growing the patient census rapidly over the next three years.

She anticipates eventually needing to double current staffing levels.

“If people can get through high school with a background and training in health care, they’re going to be able to get jobs earlier and continue their education while working in health care,” said King, who serves on Butler Tech’s community advisory council.

Many other employers also will be ready to hire the graduates, said Colleen O’Toole, president of the **Greater Cincinnati Health Council**.

“Yes, it’s a bad economy and the vacancy rates might be a bit lower in some of the entry-level positions for now,” O’Toole said. “But going forward, given the aging of the population and the fact that the economy is expected to improve, Butler Tech ... has made an insightful decision to invest in a school like this.”

The Hamilton-based Butler Tech operates more than 190 satellite programs through 10 affiliated school districts. Altogether, Butler Tech teaches more than 25,000 teen and adult students.

The organization offers classes in fields as diverse as network technology, digital media arts, biotechnology and public safety.

The curriculum for the new campus, to be built at Interstate 75 and Cincinnati-Dayton Road, is still being designed. High school students would graduate ready to enter the work force in tech or aide positions and also qualified to continue studies toward an associate’s or bachelor’s degree.

Also at the new campus would be adult education and online learning programs, though it hasn’t been decided yet what subjects or how many students. The **West Chester Chamber Alliance** also will move to the campus.

Customized training

Sommers said adult education has grown rapidly at Butler Tech as the economy has shed jobs. For the school year ending in June, enrollment was up 22 percent over the year before.

Customized training is a big part of Butler Tech’s adult education offerings and likely would have a significant presence on the new campus, he said.

Neither an architecture firm nor a construction firm has been chosen for the project, said Sommers, who added that the \$30 million to \$35 million figure is only his guess. A formal analysis outlining financials, space needs, specific programs and a business model is expected to be completed in November or December.

Sommers said Butler Tech will try to make a substantial upfront investment in the construction project and issue bonds to cover the rest of the cost.

The **Greentree Health Science Academy**, currently located in the old Monroe High School, educates about 200 juniors and seniors in such fields as nursing, pharmacy, physical therapy and imaging technology.

Greentree was formed in partnership with the **Warren County Career Center** and **Atrium Medical Center**. Butler Tech plans to leave the partnership to pursue the bio medical school project.

Butler Tech paid \$1.8 million for 24 acres of land for the I-75 campus last year. The lease continues for another year.

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