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ECC to transfer South Campus sports fields to county to make way for Bills stadium construction

Janet Gramza Sep 29, 2022



Erie Community College is transferring 56.9 acres of its South Campus in Orchard Park to the state for staging for the new Buffalo Bills stadium construction.

Mark Mulville/Buffalo News

Janet Gramza

The SUNY Erie Community College Board of Trustees agreed Thursday to transfer nearly 57 acres at its South Campus to the county to make way for the new Buffalo Bills stadium construction. After that, the land will go to New York State.

The move will not affect any of the academic buildings at ECC South, but it will involve the campus' athletic fields. ECC plans to build new athletic fields on the college's North Campus.

ECC trustees and Erie County Chief of Staff Ben Swanekamp said the 56.9 acres of South Campus property are needed for the stadium construction.

ECC already knew the county would need use of those fields at least temporarily for staging throughout the construction, which is expected to take three years starting next spring. But the transaction approved Thursday will make that transfer permanent.

Meanwhile, the county and ECC are working with the Town of Amherst on a plan to build new baseball and soccer fields on unused county land on and adjacent to ECC North Campus – an arrangement that includes the town investing in the new fields and sharing use of them for town and community sports.

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Jeffrey Stone, a partner at Hodgson Russ, is the new chair of the board of trustees for SUNY Erie. (Courtesy of Erie County)

“What’s going on here is a transfer of property that’s not being utilized, or whose utilization can be replaced in a very effective way at North,” said Jeffrey Stone, who took over as the chair of ECC's board on Thursday. “We think that makes sense for the community as a whole and particularly for the college as we face challenges that have been well-documented.”

The transfer also shifts more of ECC's facilities to its North Campus, strengthening its position as the central site with the college at a time when there are fears that the South Campus eventually could close as part of a consolidation move.



A map at an entrance on Main Street for SUNY Erie Community College North Campus.
Derek Gee / Buffalo News

“This plan is part of an overall concept of strong, new, effective athletic facilities at North Campus and also to facilitate what’s going on with the Bills stadium,” Stone added. “I see this as a real enhancement of the central campus at North, where we

already have some athletic facilities and are spending a lot of money to schlep people back and forth.”

Under the proposed arrangement, the Town of Amherst would contribute \$4 million and the county \$1 million over two years for Phase 1 of the project, which would build two baseball fields at the corner of Main Street and Tech Drive and two hybrid soccer/softball fields along Youngs Road, Swanekamp said.

That \$5 million investment would likely qualify for \$5 million in state capital project matching grants, ECC President David Balkin said.



Dr. David K. Balkin is the 12th President of SUNY Erie, Friday, Aug. 5, 2022. (Derek Gee / Buffalo News)

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Phase 2 of the plan could encompass a new football field at the North Campus, but that part is iffy. ECC football will continue at the South Campus field through this season, since the stadium construction won't start until at least April, Balkin said.

ECC is in talks with local high schools about sharing use of their football facilities while the stadium is being built, and if that arrangement works well, it may be the way of the future, Balkin said.

“A lot of area high schools have unbelievable football facilities, so rather than invest in building our own, it may make sense to use existing community resources,” Balkin said. “Especially when you recognize that high school football plays on Fridays and we play on Saturday or Sunday, and we only have four or five home games a year.”

Balkin has been all about reducing duplication, encouraging consolidation and reaching out to local industries and communities to share resources since he took over as ECC president in February and immediately faced the challenge of fending off a potential \$9 million deficit this year.

Balkin's efforts to “right-size” the college have included eliminating redundant departments, offices and positions at ECC's three campuses, implementing a county-funded retirement incentive for senior faculty and administrators and laying off about 90 staff members this past spring.

He also discontinued several low-performing programs, most of them at South Campus, prompting lots of conjecture that ECC will ultimately close the South Campus entirely to make way for the new Bills stadium and a future “Billsville” of related amenities and businesses surrounding it.

Balkin has maintained there is no foreseeable plan to close ECC South Campus. He told trustees Thursday that the disposal of 36% of the 160-acre South Campus property will have no impact on educational activities taking place there or on any campus buildings.



Fears that ECC's South Campus could close are part of what is driving faculty fears of a lesser college. President David Balkin has said there are no plans to close the campus.

Derek Gee/Buffalo News

Balkin said the grass fields at South Campus have been expensive to maintain, and the new fields to be built at North will be turf, which will greatly reduce maintenance costs.

“The goal here is to ultimately convert the north end of our campus to a more parklike sports facilities center that can be tapped more universally by the Town of Amherst and the county,” he said. “The value of that is to get more people on our college campus. The sooner they start feeling comfortable that this is their home, even if they started here in junior soccer league events, the better.”



The Erie Community College South Campus soccer fields are part of land to be transferred to the state, while new turf fields will be built at ECC North.

Besides the South Campus real estate transfer, the ECC Board of Trustees also approved a slate of new officers Thursday. Stone, the former vice chair, took over as chair, replacing Danise Wilson, who has served on the board since 2015 and will stay on as immediate past chair. New trustee Melodie Baker took over as vice chair, and Carrie Phillips was named secretary, replacing former trustee Kate Masiello, who resigned this year after seven years on the board.