

Cash-strapped Hampshire College may develop some of its 800 acres for housing, commercial use

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AMHERST — Financially strapped Hampshire College will one day turn some of its 800-acre campus into housing or commercial space as one way of insuring its future.

“In due time and for its benefit, Hampshire will develop some of this acreage in mission-aligned ways,” college interim president Kenneth Rosenthal said Friday during a public meeting with state Higher Education Commissioner Carlos E. Santiago at Amherst Town Hall.

Rosenthal, speaking in an interview after the meeting, said Hampshire has been approached by local business people, including Hampshire alums.

“Our answer is ‘We are not ready yet,’” Rosenthal said. “Anything we are talking about is years in the future. But there is an unrealized asset there. Hampshire’s been here for almost 50 years and we want to be here for much much longer.”

The long-term future of Hampshire and of every other public and private college in the state was the topic of Santiago’s question-and-answer session in Amherst. Santiago’s office is developing new ways to monitor college’s fiscal health and warn of impending closures.

The state Board of Higher Education will pass new regulations before December, Santiago said. Friday’s meeting was one way for him to learn more about how those regulations, and the fiscal health of private colleges, impacts communities.

More formal public hearings on the state regulations are set for Monday, Aug. 5, 10 a.m. at [Quinsigamond Community College](#) in Worcester and the Springfield Public Library at 2 p.m..

In Massachusetts, 18 colleges have closed or merged in the last five years.

Hampshire almost joined them and the board voted this winter to admit a very small freshman class this fall in the face of budget shortfall. But former president Miriam Nelson and some of the board resigned, Rosenthal came in and promised that Hampshire would instead stay independent and begin building back up its class size and the college has \$9 million in donations and pledges toward a \$20 million fundraising goal.

Hampshire College’s new permanent president, Edward Wingenbach, starts in August.

Amherst Town Manager Paul Bokelman said he wants the town to have a say in how any property is developed, noting that Hampshire and Amherst colleges and the University of Massachusetts are the town’s three biggest landowners and none of the three pay taxes on their land.

Rosenthal said much of Hampshire's land is zoned only for educational use and much of it forever protected as part of the state's efforts to preserve the entire north face of the Holyoke Range. Six hundred acres of Hampshire's campus is in Amherst and 200 is in Hadley.

The commercially-zoned property is mostly along the roads and near the new traffic rotaries on West Street, Route 116 and across campus on Bay Road.

There is also a field of solar panels that will end their anticipated service life in 20 years or so.

"That land could be developed," Rosenthal said.

"It could be developed with the right people in a way that is in keeping with our mission," Rosenthal said emphasizing environmental stewardship.

He would like to see the college retain ownership of the land, partnering with developers

A plan nearly 20 years ago to develop senior housing on campus fell through due to the recession and to the fact that Hampshire's alumni were too young at the time, Rosenthal said. But with the college nearing its 50th anniversary, some Hampshire alums are now in their 70s and looking for retirement housing.