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Brown medical school seen as vital stimulus

07:40 AM EDT on Tuesday, April 27, 2010

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Governor Carcieri, Providence Mayor David Cicilline, Brown University President Ruth Simmons and medical school Dean Edward Wing, right, were among those on Monday touring the site then attending a groundbreaking for the university's new Warren Alpert Medical School.

The Providence Journal / Bob Breidenbach

There is a vision for a new Providence.

One where an interstate no longer cuts through the downtown, and new land is open for redevelopment. Where streetcars run crosstown, linking the city's higher-education institutions, hospitals and downtown.

Where an old hub for manufacturing, the Jewelry District is now a hub for life-science and biotechnology research that lives up to the billing as the city's new "Knowledge District."



The building at 222 Richmond St. that will be transformed into the school.

The Providence Journal / Mary Murphy

It is a vision that starts with this: a new, Ivy League medical school in a building that used to house a jewelry maker.

For the past month, construction workers have been gutting the 1920s-era building at 222 Richmond St. Walls have been demolished; floors and ceilings stripped bare.

The former home of the Brier Manufacturing Co. — makers of a line of jewelry called Little Nemo — it will become the first permanent home of the Warren Alpert Medical School at Brown University.



An artist's rendering of how Brown's new Warren Alpert Medical School will look.

Rendering courtesy of Brown University

[Governor Carcieri](#), [Mayor David N. Cicilline](#) and Brown University President Ruth Simmons on Monday spoke at a formal groundbreaking for the \$45-million project. About 300 other officials, labor leaders and major university financial supporters were also in attendance.

State and city leaders hope the medical school will be an anchor for the state's research-based economy and spur the second wave of the Providence Renaissance.

“Twenty years from now, we’ll look back on this as one of the moves that made an enormous

contribution to the Capital City and this state,” Carcieri said at the groundbreaking.



Brown University medical students were among those attending Monday’s groundbreaking ceremony, and also got a tour of their school’s future site.

The Providence Journal / Bob Breidenbach

“It’s the most important decision in decades to growing this Knowledge Economy,” said Cicilline.

The governor and the mayor say the project, which will be completed in August, is already producing positive results.

Isis Biopolymer, a three-year-old medical-device company that is rolling out an anti-aging patch next year, recently relocated from Warwick to a building across the street to be a part of the district’s buzz.

The state’s congressional delegation is shepherding a \$460-million request for federal funding for infrastructure upgrades in the Jewelry District. That proposal, which calls for a new clinical-trials lab, a streetcar system, a supercomputing system, utilities upgrades and more, was developed earlier this year by Cicilline’s administration and the city universities and hospitals.

And a proposed voter referendum to build a \$60-million nursing school for the University of Rhode Island and Rhode Island College downtown is currently before the [General Assembly](#).



Herb Kaplan, president of the Warren Alpert Foundation, a private philanthropy with primary interests in health care, listens to the groundbreaking ceremony.

The Providence Journal / Bob Breidenbach

The fact that the medical school project is moving forward now, as the state struggles to crawl out of a national recession, is not lost on Simmons, the Brown president. “We’re proud to be providing jobs in this economy,” she said. “We recognize that we have a responsibility to this community and to this state.”

From now until August, nearly 500 construction workers will be employed. About 15 percent of the man hours on the job will go to low-income, minority city residents as part of the Building Futures program.

When it opens, the medical school will bring nearly 500 students, faculty and administrative staff to the downtown, injecting life into an underutilized section of the city.

It will overlook a four-acre city park on Eddy Street that will replace the former sections of Route 195 cutting through the downtown (those sections may come down as soon as December). A bridge using the highway’s footings will take pedestrians over the Providence River from the East Side to the Jewelry

District.

Brown sees the new medical school among the key capital projects to solidify its reputation as a world-class research center. The project is part of almost \$260 million in capital investments over the next few years to the university's historic College Hill campus and the planned downtown campus.

The new medical school, with its state-of-the-art classrooms and labs and close proximity to the state's major hospitals, will raise its national profile and allow the school to increase enrollment over time, says Dr. Edward J. Wing, the medical school dean.

The medical school has about 414 students and is currently ranked 34th in the nation, according to the U. S. News and World Report.

The university owns six other buildings along Richmond Street, some of which are already being used for life-sciences research. Other buildings may soon be converted to research or education uses.



Brown University President Ruth Simmons addresses those attending Monday's groundbreaking ceremony.

"It's a major symbolic move," Wing said. "It shows that Brown is committed to this neighborhood, this city and this state."

At the same time it opens the medical school, Brown will also open a new, \$40-million creative-arts center on Angell Street designed by the architects that produced the Institute for Contemporary Art in

Boston.

Elsewhere, it is investing \$20 million to renovate the university student center, Faunce Hall; building a \$40-million fitness and aquatics center on Hope Street; and spending \$42 million to renovate space for its cognitive-sciences and linguistics departments.

While these projects all represent scaled-back versions of projects proposed during more economically flush times, they are no less significant for the local construction industry, which has seen unemployment rates of more than 50 percent since the economic downturn, according to Michael F. Sabitoni, president of the state Building and Construction Trades Council.

“For the local building trades, Brown has been second to none,” he said.

BACKGROUND

Warren Alpert

Warren Alpert, who founded the Warren Alpert Foundation, made his fortune from Warren Equities Inc., a company he started in Providence in 1950.

He said he began the business with “\$1,000 and a used car.” The company expanded to own hundreds of ExtraMart convenience stores throughout New England and interests in real estate and transportation.

The Alpert Foundation is a private philanthropy with primary interests in health care. Its gift to Brown University is the largest in its history. Alpert died in March 2007 at the age of 86.

Brown University Medical School

The university is renovating an office building at 222 Richmond St. for its new medical school

About the building: built in 1928 and on National Register of Historic Places; three stories (with a partial fourth floor); 135,000 square feet

Projected cost: \$45 million

Jobs: 500 construction jobs; 57 jobs post-construction

Expected completion: August 2010

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