State education bond opens downtown doors for WSC

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WESTFIELD — A $2 billion state higher education bond bill, passed by the Senate and in front of the House Ways and Means Committee, will mean some $26 million in funds destined for Westfield State College for building construction and renovations. But, perhaps more importantly for the City of Westfield, an obscure language change which would eliminate a cap on revenue bonds issued by the Massachusetts State College Building Authority.

Westfield State College President Evan Dobelle said the language change opens the door for a $100 million public/private project to build dormitories, bookstores and even a performing arts center in the city’s downtown area, a plan being promoted by Dobelle and Mayor Michael Boulanger.

“It is important that the language was struck, because it allows us to use our student fees as a revenue source. That opens the possibility for revenue producing development in the downtown,” he said. “Now, we don’t want to use those fees, but it gives security we can use in developing private/public partnerships, which is the only way I would do this.”

Dobelle said maintaining a private component to the development means that not all properties would be state owned, and therefore untax-

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able. Dormitories and commercial properties aimed at servicing college students would be fully taxable.

The next step in the development process is to develop a master plan for all parties to use as they move forward.

State Sen. Michael Knapik said he was able to affect the language change at the behest of the college and city.

“It was done specifically for these projects,” he said. “When Dr. Dobelle came on board and he began working with the city, we realized that the classroom building project would be handled by the bond bill, but going off campus was going to be limited by the language the MSCBA works under. Lifting that in a responsible fashion allows the college to become a full partner in working with the mayor and the City Council. Now all three can move forward with their partnership in making downtown Westfield better.”

Knapik noted that for a long time presence in the community, Westfield State College has only a small impact on Westfield.

“It is a suburban campus with little synergistic relationship to Westfield,” he said. “Dr. Dobelle has recognized the need for the college to create critical mass in the downtown. Marry this with the work that has been done and you have a completely different dynamic at work.”

The bond bill also promises some $23.4 million in construction funds for an on-campus classroom building. But both Dobelle and Knapik say they recognize that the project will be needing significantly more money before it can begin.

“I am grateful to Sen. Knapik for the money he has provided for us, but I think we could use a little more,” Dobelle said. “The funds provided are in ’06 dollars, and by now those estimates have increased significantly. The building probably won’t go up until 2012, so I’d rather see 2008 dollars.”

Knapik agreed that the $23.4 million would only be a down payment.

“This gets the college in the game,” he said. “We will have to add some additional amounts later on; likely in the $25-30 million range.”

Dobelle said the academic building is necessary for the growth of the college. Certainly the school has struggled to provide living space for its students in on-campus housing, but while dormitories have been build to allow more students to study at WSC, academic space has fallen behind.

Dobelle said before too much living space is constructed, academic space must be the priority issue for the school.

The bill includes some $2.8 million for renovation to Dever Auditorium, the school’s only large auditorium. Dobelle said after nearly 50 years, the venue is getting a little shopworn, and needs to be brought up to current handicapped accessibility standards.