

UMass looks at city site

Star Store building intended for artists

By Susan Pawlak-Seaman
Standard-Times staff writer

NEW BEDFORD — The Star Store building would be rehabilitated as the new home of UMass Dartmouth's arts program, under a multi-tiered letter of intent signed by the city, the school department and the university.

The proposal would also create much needed space for a number of School Department programs.

"It definitely is a win-win situation," Mayor Rosemary S. Tierney said yesterday, adding that if the process moves ahead as envisioned, "it's conceivable" that UMass Dartmouth art students could be studying and patronizing businesses in the downtown area by this time next year.

"It will be wonderful," Mayor Tierney said. "We'll have foot traffic downtown, college kids involved in activities and spending money. Downtown will be alive and vibrant."

For his part, UMass Dartmouth Chancellor Peter H. Cressy did not offer a specific timetable for the project.

"Both the mayor and I are hopeful of getting this done as fast as we can. But I don't know if getting in there in a year is possible," he said. "It's a little complex and we don't know if all the pieces will fall into place."

Evenso, Dr. Cressy said he is optimistic that the plans ultimately will come to fruition. He pointed out that, thanks to language crafted by Sen. Mark C.W. Montigny in the higher education bond bill, the university has access to as much as \$3.5 million for converting the Star Store for UMass Dartmouth use.

"I don't think (the project) will be easy but I think we have a good shot at it," the chancellor said. "There's a lot of work to do but it is do-able."

Added Dr. Cressy, "Our position is that if this is good for the city and makes sense for the university financially and educationally, we'll do everything we can to be helpful in the process."

However, the letter of intent, unveiled at the New Bedford School Committee meeting Monday night, took at least one person by surprise.

"I've never seen it," said Paul C. Downey, the developer of the Star Store project. Mr. Downey said yesterday while he did talk with Dr. Cressy about the Star Store space a number of months ago, nothing definitive emerged.

"It's way, way too early, too premature to discuss what I plan to do with the building," Mr. Downey said. "There's a time and a place for that, but I'm not in a position to say right now."

Specifically, the agreement, dated Oct. 30, 1995, provides that:

UMass Dartmouth and the city schools will jointly apply to the federal government to occupy and conduct educational programs at the former Naval Reserve Center at Fort Rodman.

The reserve center property will be held by the city and leased to the university, long-term, for \$1 per year.

UMass Dartmouth will accommodate the School

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*UMass
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Department's Sea Lab program as well as an interactive marine science program with the New Bedford Public Schools.

The university will allow the city schools to use space in its Purchase Street buildings, with a move there by the Parenting Teens Program expected early in 1996. Adult education classes would also be housed there at a later date.

It concludes by stating that UMass Dartmouth "agrees to support the relocation of its Purchase Street visual/performing arts program to the Star Store building under the provisions as agreed to by the commonwealth and as funded through the appropriate bond issue."

Under the proposal, the Purchase Street buildings, which include the former SMTI and Greater New Bedford Community Health Center structures, would then be turned back over to the city — which, in the mid-1980's, gave UMass Dartmouth control of the old Southeastern Massachusetts Technical Institution.

Mayor Tierney said the first task is convincing the federal government to turn over control of the Naval Reserve Center. Neither she nor Dr. Cressy sees any problems on that front, but the question is how long the matter will take.

Once the center is in city hands, the university will use it as an adjunct to its marine science building at Fort Rodman. "It will be ideal for

the aquaculture and fisheries piece," Dr. Cressy said.

The city and university will also create a permanent home for the School Department's summer Sea Lab marine sciences education program. UMass Dartmouth will also establish new science outreach efforts with the city schools, the chancellor said.

UMass Dartmouth has further agreed to share space with the schools at the former Purchase Street health center, now the home of the university's Neighborhood College. Rooms available in the structure, located on the east side of Purchase Street, will allow for the near-immediate relocation of the Parenting Teens program, said Steven B. Lamarche, the School Department's administrative assistant for business.

"The Fire Department has been concerned because the program, (which includes a day care center), is now on the third floor at the Rodrigues School Administration Building," Mr. Lamarche said. "They're worried about getting the kids out if there's a fire. It's not an ideal situation."

He said school officials want to move the program as quickly as possible, "hopefully after the first of the year." Then, at some time later next year, "We also intend to put some of our adult education classes there and expand that program."

Mr. Lamarche said the adult classes held on the third floor of the Ingraham School are not handicap-accessible and they might be shifted to Purchase Street, along with high

school equivalency testing now done at the Rodrigues building.

Setting up shop at Purchase Street would give students better access to bus service, while at the same time allowing the school administration to oversee the programs from the central office, he said.

Dr. Cressy and Dr. Michael Taylor, dean of UMass Dartmouth's College of Visual and Performing Arts, said there would also be advantages in moving to the heart of downtown.

Dr. Taylor said the artisanry, painting, sculpture and printmaking programs now at Purchase Street need better facilities. "We would like to do something to upgrade the studios," he said.

"That could be done at Purchase Street or at the Star Store." He said the advantage to the latter is that it has floors of largely wide open spaces where studios could be customized.

"I also have a feeling that a downtown location such as the Star Store would be more attractive to our students," he said noting that they would have better access to parking, stores, restaurants, and the like.

Dr. Taylor said that "an urban art college can be a positive selling point."

Similarly, Dr. Cressy said a downtown locale "would be great for our students" whose presence in turn would benefit the city by bringing in others.

"I could see it being a charming area, alive with people. I bet it would be a real fun place," he said.