

Cross Creek Campus: Summary report of Board of Trustees (IHL) meeting, Gulf Park campus, 12.4.07

By Ray Scurfield

These are my notes of this important IHL meeting. Shahdad N., Ken Z, Elizabeth D., Pat Smith and Will W were other faculty in attendance who might have additional or differing memories of important points.

This meeting included nine (of the 12) members of the IHL Board of Trustees (and it was emphasized that those IHL members not in attendance also were full behind the Cross Creek campus), several elected officials, business leaders, USM faculty and staff . . . (perhaps 40 or so in attendance?).

Summary impression: the meeting was quite up-beat in enthusiasm and content, with the primary focus on developments concerning the Cross Creek Campus, and secondarily concerns about maintaining the viability of the Gulf Park campus.

Following opening comments by Amy Whitten, Vice-President, IHL (in lieu of the absence of the President, L Stacey Davidson) to include the comment that “We have a wide-open landscape” (the Cross Creek Campus), and there will be nothing more important that we do (as an IHL) during our 12-year terms than this campus.” Mention was made about the remarkable job that Associate Provost Joachim and the faculty and staff accomplished in the aftermath of Katrina to be back up and running within six weeks of the devastation.

John Hairston (Hancock Bank) then gave the most detailed presentation. He stated that after Katrina and the destruction of much of the technological infrastructure of Hancock Bank at its location near Highway 90, Hancock Bank studied many alternate locations intently to find the safest, most secure and accessible site to major power grids, etc., for their corporate office and technological complex. This included several offers to relocate to other locations outside of coastal Mississippi.

Following serious consideration of such offers and their analyses of several alternative locations, Hancock Bank concluded that their 2,000 acres of land holdings immediately north of I-10 and south of Landon Road, and between Canal Road and Beatline Road, was the ideal location for Hancock to establish their technological complex; “South Mississippi is the place for Hancock to stay.”

In addition, this was a compelling location for the donated 200 acres Cross Creek campus site to be, within their 2,000 acres that would complement their extensive development plans for their land (to include a variety of pedestrian and bike-friendly planned residential communities, complementary commercial businesses, possible light industry, etc.):

- ? High and dry elevation
- ? Their 2,000 acres is the largest privately owned tract of land along I-10.
- ? A very high concentration of vehicular traffic---65,000 to 70,000 vehicles---pass by the Cross Creek location daily
- ? The major power grids are in the immediate area
- ? 70,000 college students live in a 20-30 mile stretch along the I-10 corridor
- ? Over 16,000 high school students, most from 5 star rated schools, are in the 3 coastal counties; and substantial numbers of potential students from eastern Louisiana/greater Slidell area and western Alabama/greater Mobile area are within easy I-10 commutes

- ? A very strong workforce and industrial presence that includes a substantial demand for a local and educated workforce
- ? Unparalleled access to the major traffic route in south Mississippi along I-10 (Canal Road and Beatline/Firetower Road already have I-10 interchanges and a new interchange between Canal and Beatline is being proposed that would exit directly into the middle of the 2,000 acre holding
- ? Also, MDOT plans to build a major north-south artery from the port of Gulfport and northward parallel and to the west of Highway 49. This will offer a major north-south traffic artery to the campus.

The IHL has the option to select the 200 acres for Cross Creek anywhere within Hancock’s 2,000 acre holdings, and will have this selection on their agenda for their January 2008 meeting.

President Saunders then gave an upbeat report on the campus dialogues, a brief history of how USM has evolved from a single campus in Hattiesburg to a dual campus with six teaching and research sites and a 7th on the way (Cross Creek). In addition to the existing 69 degree programs, 10 additional are tentatively planned for Cross Creek, and there is a commitment that students will be able to complete *all* of their coursework on the Gulf Coast. President Saunders also emphasized the requirement for USM to provide adequate professional development for new faculty hires—labs, studio facilities, etc. and that there will be consistent standards of excellent for all faculty at all USM campuses. Dr. Saunders emphasized “university embedded in the community” as very appealing and important, to include internships/placements/educational offerings connected with local hospitals, businesses, etc. Finally, the Gulf Park campus in Long Beach is envisioned for appropriate “stand-alone” programs, with an arts and entertainment focus to the greatest extent possible.

Bob Bass, former mayor of Long Beach and the lead person hired by the IHL to oversee the various USM-related initiatives and developments in coastal Mississippi, gave a brief talk. He mentioned that the planning process for developments for Cross Creek include solicitations initiated on Nov. 5-6 for a master planning contract. He expects a 6-month or so review through this competitive bid process to select a firm to lead the master planning.

Ed Blakely, Board of Trustees, gave a short talk, expressing very strong enthusiasm for USM developments in coastal Mississippi, and mentioned that the current population and growth projections are such “there is no reason that we cannot have 10,000 to 15,000 students down here one day . . .”

Tom Meredith, Board of Trustees, echoed earlier comments and emphasized that the Cross Creek campus, with its visibility and accessibility, “will be one of the centerpieces of the resurrection of the Gulf Coast after Katrina.”

In the question and answer session that followed, both Representative Peranich (D-DeLisle) and Mayor Billy Skellie (Long Beach) emphasized that while they strongly support the Cross Creek Campus, both were concerned that the Gulf Park campus did not suffer from diversion of funds already identified for the Gulf Park campus to be diverted to Cross Creek or any other use, and that Gulf Park was not forgotten or neglected in the planning process for Cross Creek. They were assured that Gulf Park would remain a vital and important campus.

I emphasized, in my position as President of the GC Faculty Council, that I wanted to make sure that the IHL knew that our faculty are dedicated, enthusiastic and indeed passionate about our roles in teaching, scholarship and community service, and have dealt admirably and are still dealing with enormous challenges as well as opportunities post-Katrina, were *absolutely committed to wanting to be embedded in all phases of the strategic planning process for both the Cross Creek and Gulf Park campuses*. And, while it had been mentioned that the Deans had been involved in early identification of potential academic programs and offerings, that the line faculty, who actually teach the courses, have *not* been involved and very much needed to be. I also highlighted that we

have wonderful *staff* throughout many departments and that our staff also were highly committed and wanting and needed to be included in all phases of the strategic planning process.

Pat S. also expressed concern whether a prior detailed community survey of educational needs and priorities on the Gulf Coast would be updated and included in the strategic planning process. And Shahdad N. wondered if the Cross Creek campus would have a Long Beach address? [Mayor Skellie said that this was being addressed—and later that evening the Long Beach City Council passed a resolution to hire a consultant to do a feasibility study of the merits of annexing land north of I-10 to Landon Road, that would include the Cross Creek Campus].

Two important side-conversations occurred after the meeting:

- ? A conversation ensued between a Board of Trustees member with we faculty who were in attendance, on the subject of concerns as to how split the Gulfport teaching site and Gulf Park campus were, especially between faculty offices at Gulfport and students attending the 2/3 of the course offerings that were being taught at Gulf Park. Several faculty wanted strong efforts to be made to relocate as many faculty and course offerings to the Gulf Park campus as quickly as possible---rather than waiting for Cross Creek to be built many years down the road. [This issue actually highlighted that there needs to be an “interim master plan” for the Gulf Park—and Gulfport---campuses now, in addition to the “ultimate master plan” for the Gulf Park campus vis-à-vis the ultimate master plan for the Cross Creek campus, e.g., what would be appropriate *ultimately* for Gulf Park was a quite different issue from what would be most appropriate for Gulf Park in these next extremely important 5+ years while Cross Creek is being built. Otherwise, as was emphasized by some of the faculty present, the quality of the educational experience may be diluted, faculty and staff morale may suffer and we may lose significant numbers of current and/or future students during this interim period, etc.[This, of course, is a complex issue; for example, COST and COH lab facilities in the GC Student Services Center could not be realistically or cheaply temporarily replicated at Gulf Park, whereas relocating several of the trailers over to Gulf Park, as one faculty member recommended, would be relatively easy to accomplish and could allow substantial numbers of faculty to relocate to Gulf Park . . .]
- ? In a separate communication, another member of the Board of Trustees, in a candid comment privately to several of the faculty, stressed, indeed, emphasized quite strongly, that there needed to be *continued vigilance* to insure that the enthusiasm and commitment to Cross Creek expressed today by the Board of Trustees continued and did not dissipate or become inappropriately diverted to other issues in the ensuing months and years.

I welcome comments and viewpoints from the other faculty members who were present at the IHL meeting, and there are important issues related to the information that came out in and after this meeting that, of course, the entire GCFC (and other faculty) should dialogue about.

See y'all at the December 14, 10:00 AM GCFC meeting.

Ray Scurfield