

With 36 Becker College buildings, Worcester neighborhood faces uncertain future



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WORCESTER — As Becker College's impending closure looms over the Elm Park neighborhood and Worcester, nearby property owners and city officials hope that the college's property is taken over by responsible owners.

"Each campus is an economic engine in and of itself," Timothy P. Murray, Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce president and CEO, said, "The loss of Becker both in the Highland Street, Elm Park neighborhood and Leicester is a blow to both the neighborhood and regional economy. The disposition of assets is going to be important to try to make sure we are collectively trying to infill the neighborhood in a way that supports the neighborhood businesses."

Becker College announced that it would close at the end of the spring semester in May. The college, which has a history in Central Mass. dating back to the late 1700s, owns several properties in Worcester and Leicester.

According to a document provided by the city of Worcester, Becker College owns 36 pieces of property in the city. The total property is valued at \$22,788,200 and represents 13.05 acres of land.

"It's been great for the neighborhood, great for a lot of the small businesses in that area. Generations of college kids have come and gone. Hundreds of faculty and staff. They support many of the local restaurants, coffee shops and other stores," Edward Augustus Jr., Worcester city manager, said, "That really adds to the viability of those small businesses, having that kind of foot traffic."

More: [The closing of Becker College: A look at the numbers](#)

The college also bought several historic buildings that it converted to dorms, most likely saving them from being lost, Augustus said. He hopes that a future owner would continue preserving those historic buildings and not tear them down for other uses such as parking.

"We want to make sure that those buildings are not lost," Augustus said, "We want to make sure somebody doesn't come in and tear the buildings down for parking or something of that nature. We want to preserve the character of the neighborhood."

Murray said that having an "anchor partner" for the neighborhood would help its economy. Such a partner would be a responsible owner of the properties, who also cares about the properties, and may generate some economic activity for nearby businesses, he said.

Augustus has communicated with Becker that he would like to discuss the timeframe for certain buildings and any potential buyer interest that the college has seen. He said the city plans to be active in discussing whatever next moves the college takes with its property whenever the time comes to have the conversation.

"We don't know, yet, how it's going to impact long term," Russ Haims, owner of Hampton Properties, said, "I think it will hit equilibrium and it won't become blighted. You won't find that there's vacancies everywhere because the city still has a strong need for housing."

He added that property occupied by local ownership is preferred as the city knows who to reach out to about any issues and any chance of putting non-tax properties on the tax roll is also beneficial to the city, as would avoiding inattentive landlords who fail to manage upkeep at the properties.

As someone with a large vested interest in the neighborhood, Haims wishes that the college sells its property to owners who plan to maintain the condition of the college's assets.

"My concern is if they just start selling these properties to anyone who hasn't exhibited a commitment to the neighborhood and maybe comes in from out of the area just being able to outbid others," Haims said.



A new owner who lacks the management experience and commitment to being a healthy part of the neighborhood could hurt the other property owners and drive away renters, Haims said.

Haims' company owns 18 residential properties in the Elm Park neighborhood where Becker's Worcester campus is located. While time will tell about the economic effects of the closure, Haims said he does not expect real estate values in the neighborhood to be affected

by the college's closure due to the strong market, but demand for rental space might decrease without the Becker student body in the neighborhood.

"I think long-term, if another institution doesn't go there in its place and brings back a core of student activity, it may diminish the demand side of the rental market there," Haims said.

The neighborhood also has several other institutions that help it maintain its value, including schools, has properties with well-maintained historic architecture, and is close to Elm Park, Haims said.

"It's very safe. It's next to Elm Park. It has a lot of attributes and it's not just the school," he said.

While the closing prompted Haims to consider the property that he owned in the neighborhood, he said that he still has faith in the value of the area.

"At first there's the big, 'Oh my God. What's going to happen?' initial reaction," Haims said, "But then, when the dust settles and you think about it calmly and look at the future, I'm still very positive towards the future of that neighborhood."



Haims purchased three dorms from Becker last August and has already converted two of them for apartments. In what he sees as a show of the continued desirability of the neighborhood, Haims said all 14 of the currently converted apartments were committed to renters for June 1, and none of the renters are Becker students.

Becker provided a welcome college atmosphere to the area and is also a good neighbor to fellow property owners, Haims said. He added that they were responsive to any concerns about off-campus student behavior in the neighborhood and made sure that students were treating the properties with respect, Haims said.

"There was a college campus vibe. You had a lot of young, intelligent, enthusiastic students walking about the campus going from residence halls to classes," Haims said. "It was never really a party school where it was rambunctious and you see a lot of litter around the properties."

In order to help current Becker students who are in the midst of deciding their next move after the college closes, Haims said Becker students who rent his properties will not be held to their leases if they need to move.

"We don't want to compound their stress and their upended future that nobody really saw coming," Haims said.

The short-term future of some Becker properties in Worcester has already been announced. Clark University [plans to lease](#) both Becker's Colleen C. Barrett Center at 80 Williams St. and Weller Academic Center at 61 Sever St. The university is absorbing Becker's highly regarded video game design program and will use the leased property to allow students pursuing a gaming degree to stay on the campus.

