State of Clemson? It's good

Leaders highlight achievements at annual luncheon

BY GREG OLIVER
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CLEMSON — Clemson Mayor J.C. Cook and Clemson University Provost Dori Helms told attendees at the 25th annual State of Clemson Address on Monday that a number of positive things are happening with both entities.



Cook

However, the one negative discussed by Cook to the record audience of more than 400 at the Madren Center involved the current Tax Increment Finance lawsuit the city is embroiled in with Pickens County Council and the Pickens County School Board of Trustees. The suit, among other things, alleges that the city misused surplus revenue from the TIF plan the three parties first entered into in 1998.

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"We had hoped it would be over with by now, but it's still hanging," Cook said.

While Cook said the TIF has produced $642 million of new development, he added only 16 percent of the development has actually taken place inside the city.

Cook said the city completed the second portion of its first phase of streetscape improvements last summer. That phase included improvements to Keith, Finley and McCollum streets, and Cook expects Clemson and its residents to reap the rewards of improved sidewalks and more modern features.

"We're seeing new development already starting behind the Clemson Variety and Frame Shop and more development scheduled to start this summer," Cook said.

The mayor added that he hopes to see the Berkeley Drive Pedestrian Bridge project near Clemson Elementary School begin sometime this year.

Clemson Area Transit experienced what the mayor called another standout year. Not only did CAT recently receive a 62-foot-long articulated or "Bendy" bus, set to begin operation later this month, the city will also have another such bus by the end of this year.

As far as partnership opportunities between the city and university, Cook said City Council, staff and the university have teamed together to work with residents affected by the Douthit Hills redevelopment project, which features a residential housing area, dining facility and a new primary campus bookstore; sought a location for a fire substation and raised $2,500 at the inaugural Clemson Regatta that benefited the university rowing team and non-profit organizations throughout the city.

In looking to the future, Cook is excited over several housing complexes — including The Orchard on Old Central Road, a residential development with multi-family housing which opened last year; and Aspen Heights, on S.C. 93, a 600-bedroom, residential-student bedroom community across from Littlejohn Community Center set to open later this year.

Another project would bring mixed retail and development to Daniel Drive. The project would consist of 95 units, mostly four-bedroom, but also including two and three-bedroom units on a 2 to 2 ½ acre site. In addition, a 310-space, five-and-a-half story parking deck entering off Daniel Drive and 7,000-10,000 square feet of retail/commercial space, as well as some on-street parking and a courtyard area with a pool, would also be featured.

"It will really change the look of downtown," Cook said, adding construction is set to begin this summer.

CLEMSON UNIVERSITY

Clemson University Provost Dori Helms, pinch hitting for President Jim Barker as he continues to recover from recent heart bypass surgery, said the state of the university "is very strong."

For example, Helms said the university ranks among the Top 25 in the U.S. and number 34 among the best values in public education, according to Kiplinger's.

Clemson University continues to enjoy another record year of enrollment with 3,450 in this year's freshman class with an average SAT score of 1,246. Helms added that the university is continuing to strive to meet its 65-35 ratio of in state to out-of-state students with applications for next fall's freshman class "at an all-time high."

But Helms added there would be a greater disparity in the number of applications versus the number of students accepted for enrollment.

"There are six applications for every seat," she said.

The provost pointed out Clemson continues to rank higher than Ivy League institutions for the best return for tax dollars and ranked among the Top 10 in U.S. News & World Report for schools providing students with the most opportunities for internships and co-ops.

Not only is the university working to provide students ready to enter the work force upon graduation, Helms said the university also plans to add to its own work force. She said Clemson University plans to hire 100 faculty members over the next five years in areas including endowed chairs, engineering and science.

Helms said the opening of the new Life Sciences building this week as well as the new indoor practice facility for the Clemson football team is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to new construction.

Next year marks Helms' 40th at Clemson University, and she told audience member it isn't just the people of the university, but also the people of the City of Clemson, that have kept her from wanting to go anywhere else.

"It is the feeling of openness that has made this a very special place – not only for students, but also the faculty," Helms said. "Thank you for this relationship because it is indeed what makes this a very special place."

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