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SCCC courses at Hopatcong High get board OK



New Jersey Herald File Photo - Hopatcong High School

By Katie Moen New Jersey Herald

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HOPATCONG -- Starting Monday, students will be able to take Sussex County Community College courses in Hopatcong. An agreement that was unanimously approved Wednesday during a special meeting of the Hopatcong Board of Education named Hopatcong High School as the second satellite campus of SCCC.

The first satellite program launched in Vernon in 2016. SCCC President Jon Connolly said that more than 60 students had taken advantage of the new location during the fall semester.

"It's going very well at the Vernon location so far," he said during the meeting on Wednesday. "The cosmetology program in particular that we're offering up there is doing especially well."

Connolly said that the new satellite program in Hopatcong would allow the college to reach even more of the county than it currently does.

"SCCC, for about 10 years or so, has looked inward," Connolly said during the special board meeting. "Anyone that wanted to benefit from our services had to come to us. One of the most important aspects of our mission is access. If you do not take steps to accommodate the geography of your students, that's an access issue. You're not paying attention, and we want to be an organization that pays attention."

Hopatcong Superintendent Cynthia Randina said that she had been behind the plan since its earliest planning stages. Under the agreement, Hopatcong students will have the opportunity to take advantage of the courses being offered by the college while they are still in high school.

"It is our hope that some of our students will be able to graduate with both a high school diploma and an associate's degree at the same time," she said. "This program is the first step toward making this happen."

Under normal circumstances, SCCC students from Sussex County pay \$140 per credit. In addition to the proximity benefits, the agreement between the two entities says that Hopatcong High School students will be able to take advantage of a 50 percent discount on any SCCC course offered in Hopatcong.

"This is a real win-win," Randina said.

Connolly said that while the college had initially reached out to both districts at the same time, the Vernon Board of Education moved more quickly to bring the program to fruition.

"Vernon saw the benefits of this program right away, and we were able to put a plan into action almost immediately," he said. "Hopatcong presented a few additional challenges, which is why we were not able to launch both programs at the same time."

The process to create a partnership with the districts began in August 2015, Connolly said.

"The administration did their very best to try accommodate us as quickly as possible. We're both public entities, and we're both here to foster the best learning environment for our students," he said. "The Board of Education also expressed some keen interest in the project, so we thought it would be pretty smooth sailing."

However, Connolly said, parents and borough residents soon began to express some concerns.

"This is a very unusual program," board President Anthony Fasano said. "I think it was important for this board to take a lot of different considerations into account before reaching a decision."

According to Connolly, most of the concerns surrounding the program related to safety and cost.

"Folks seemed to be concerned about security and safety. You might have a 27-year-old who comes to take classes here, and somehow, they felt that even though these classes would be held after regular school hours and on the weekends, there could be a security issue," Connolly said.

"As to the financial side of things, a lot of local residents felt that the college should be made to compensate the district for the use of its resources before an agreement could be reached."

When it became clear that things would not be sorted out before September, SCCC and the Hopatcong board agreed that the start date for the satellite program would be pushed back to the beginning of the spring semester, which is scheduled for Monday, Jan. 23.

Fasano also said the board needed time to bring its two new members, Warren Gallagher III and Alex McLean, up to speed on the situation.

A memorandum of understanding was presented at the special meeting Wednesday detailing the agreement.

The memorandum states that SCCC will be responsible for security when SCCC staff and students are using the building and parking lot at its own expense. Connolly said that while the request for campus security was certainly not unreasonable, it was a bit of an "unexpected wrinkle."

"We don't even have security issues on our own campus. These returning students are motivated people who want to make a serious change for the better in their lives. These are the types of people that you want to have around," he said.

"However, I understand completely that the parents in this town and the members of the board want to make sure that their students are safe. We certainly want the same thing. We are more than happy to work with them in this capacity."

The memorandum also states that SCCC will give the Hopatcong Board of Education about 50 percent of its net revenue after the cost of operations. Security would be considered part of the cost of operations.

Two changes to the agreement were announced after the board met in executive session.

Connolly was not made aware of the board's intention to make any last-minute adjustments.

One change shortened the term of the agreement from 18 months to six; and a second allowed the board to draw on a \$1,000 security deposit from the college "to pay facility expenses" rather than "for any incidental damages," as had been considered previously.

Though Connolly said that he had not necessarily been anticipating the changes, neither of them altered the original agreement enough to warrant further discussion.

"This is a trial run," he said. "Obviously, we're very gratified. It can be hard work for new partnerships to form. It's not about what the college wants. It's about what you folks need and want. This is, for us, the real point and the purpose."

Connolly said that so far, fewer than 10 students are registered to take courses in Hopatcong. However, he said that approval from the board would mean that the college will be able to start promoting the new program.

"If our numbers in Vernon are any indication, enrollment at Hopatcong should be good," he said.

SCCC will offer an introduction computer science, computer concepts and applications, introduction to hospitality, or introduction to social media at Hopatcong High School this spring. Connolly said he remained hopeful that courses at the new location could start on Monday, but it is possible they will be pushed back a week or so.

Registration for all SCCC classes, including those that will now be offered in Hopatcong, can be done online at <http://sussex.edu/>.