Under Trani, VCU becomes economic engine

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Every spring, families come from the suburban counties around Richmond to attend high school graduation ceremonies at Virginia Commonwealth University's Siegel Center.

For many of them, it's alien territory.

"It's amazing the number of people who have never been to VCU's campus," said Athletic Director Richard L. Sander, who also is assistant to President Eugene P. Trani.

What they may not know is that VCU almost came to them.

More than a dozen years ago, not long after Trani arrived from the Midwest, the university took a hard look at an offer of land for the university in the West Creek office development in Goochland County. West Creek is owned now by William H. Goodwin Jr. and Beverley W. "Booty" Armstrong, but it wasn't then.

VCU considered accepting the land as the site of a proposed engineering school and other parts of the university, including its business school, "to, in effect, create a suburban research park," Trani said.

The university created its research park, but not in the suburbs. It stayed in Richmond, but not in its old urban box.

The result is a new university and, Richmond business leaders hope, a new economic engine for the city and region. It happened because of Trani and the friends he cultivated in the upper echelon of the local business community as well as city government. Among them are Mayor L. Douglas Wilder, who remains a part-time member of the university's faculty.

"They all understood that a major research university is an essential building block for a modern community in the technological world," Trani said.

That's not what VCU was when he arrived. In his mind, it was a collection of schools in a challenging urban environment that catered to students who commuted from the suburbs. The university's reputation rested on the accomplishments of VCU's School of Medicine and an emphasis on the arts, social work and the humanities.

Physically, "there was only one direction for the university to expand, and that was east of Belvidere," said Steven A. Markel, vice chairman of the Markel Corp., former member of VCU's board of visitors, and the principal benefactor behind the new business school that will be part of the Monroe Campus in downtown Richmond.

Goodwin, a major donor to VCU, had that in mind when he selected the site for the engineering school at the corner of Main and Belvidere streets. "Just to build an engineering building was not enough," Goodwin said.
Goodwin was a trustee for the MCV Foundation when Trani met him. The two men have similar visions and leadership qualities. They think strategically and act decisively. They are hard-nosed businessmen, even though one is an academic.

"Gene Trani could run any corporation in America," said Jay M. Weinberg, a veteran zoning attorney and former member of the VCU board.

"Goodwin is just spooky smart," said Wallace Stettinius, who has played a big role in reshaping VCU’s business school.

While James E. Ukrop says he wants to breathe new life into downtown’s old buildings, Goodwin is interested in replacing blighted or vacant blocks with something new. He had that in mind as he has collected land from Belvidere to one of his most prominent properties, The Jefferson Hotel. VCU already owned some land in the area, too.

This year, Goodwin and his wife, Alice, gave $32.5 million for expanding the engineering school, while Steven and Katherine Markel gave $10 million for the business school.

The creation of the engineering school led to what may have been the university’s biggest contribution to the region’s business community, a biotechnology park behind the Richmond Coliseum near the medical campus. The park has landed some big tenants, but none bigger than Philip Morris USA, which plans to build a research center there.

"Without the biotech park, there would be no Philip Morris putting $300 million in investment down there," Weinberg said.

The VCU Health System, built around what once was known as the Medical College of Virginia, is engulfing the city’s historic Court End. Life sciences -- with a new building named after Trani and his wife, Lois -- has become the intellectual link between two campuses that creep toward each other across downtown Richmond.

"If they meet psychologically, I'll be happy," Trani said. "I don't think they're going to meet physically."

In that way, the physical transformation of VCU reflects a deeper change in the university’s mission, in which the community’s business interests have merged with academic ambitions.

"The core debate is where's the heart of the institution?" said Jeffrey S. Cribbs, a former VCU planning and real estate official.

Goodwin may have pointed his finger at the heart of the new VCU the day he chose the site of the engineering school.

"He was right," Cribbs said.

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