



RECORD STAFF

Conestoga College president John Tibbits stands by a field -- across from Highway 401 and the college's Doon campus -- where he hopes to see the development of the new Cambridge campus, contingent on financing from the province.



ARCHITECTS' RENDERING

Sketch of the proposed phase one building



ARCHITECTS' RENDERING

An architect's drawing of the proposed Cambridge campus of Conestoga College, with a sketch of the proposed phase one building (top).

Expanding horizons

Rapidly growing Conestoga College eyes Cambridge land for new campus

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The possibility of snagging a new food-processing institute is adding fuel to Conestoga College's expansion hopes in Cambridge.

The stars are aligned for big things to come at Ontario's No. 1-rated public college, say supporters of a proposed \$47.2-million addition on 54 hectares of green field in Cambridge.

The addition is part of a \$71.4-million expansion of the entire college.

Supporters are optimistic the province's spring budget will contain good news.

"I believe it'll happen and I think we'll hear some announcements this spring on it," Cambridge Mayor Doug Craig said.

The case for expansion has become even stronger since the college began promoting the proposal in 2006, Conestoga president John Tibbits says.

Since then, Ontario's food-processing industry has come forward with a plan to train students for a fast-growing sector that uses increasingly sophisticated technology.

Building a full-fledged institute is one of the options. No decision has been made, but Craig Richardson, president of Grand River Poultry, and its subsidiary Grand River Foods in Cambridge, believes Conestoga would be the best location.

"Students will come from all over Ontario to attend an institute," said Richardson, who heads a steering committee of industry and government representatives.

"Conestoga has the capability to deliver this in a really, really strong, effective way."

Here's what else is happening, supporters say, to show the time is right for a major new campus in Cambridge, across Highway 401 from Doon campus:

It's a "big plus" that the new minister of training, colleges and universities is Kitchener Centre MPP John Milloy, Craig says.

"I think the fact that Milloy being the new minister has upped this considerably and I think also Conestoga College being the No. 1 college . . . certainly helps our case."

The college expects to grow 10 per cent a year for at least the next five years.

That would mean growing from 3,000 to more than 4,000 apprentices within five years, and from 7,000 to more than 10,000 full-time post-secondary students, Tibbits says.

The region's dynamic economy is bringing people here in droves. There is a growing shortage of skilled workers.

Thousands of workers who have lost jobs in the manufacturing sector need retraining.

"There's a significant percentage of employees that do not have high enough skill levels to adapt to the new technologies," Tibbits said.

The province wants to see more rapid growth in apprenticeship, and is making more operating dollars available.

Conestoga, the third-largest apprenticeship college in Ontario, could take more apprentices, but doesn't have the space.

"The No. 1 reason that students choose a college, either for post-secondary or apprenticeship. . . is the program in the community," Tibbits said. "So we are limiting access to apprenticeship and post-secondary in this community because in some areas we don't have capacity."

The province is pushing colleges to get more people to participate in post-secondary education.

The Canada-Ontario Labour Market Development Agreement has been signed, resulting in more money and programming to retrain workers.

Tibbits, Craig, labour leader Len Carter and others have been making their case for the new campus in Cambridge with top provincial politicians and members of the community.

With water, sewage and other services still to be developed on the land, it would probably be 2010 when a new campus could open, Tibbits said.

"The need is extraordinary. The college is too small for the community," said Carter, labour co-chair for the Waterloo-Wellington training and adjustment board and a former Conestoga College board member.

With more than 8,000 workers laid off in Waterloo Region in the last year and a half, retraining is a top priority, he said.

Supporters hope to meet soon with Milloy, who became a cabinet minister in October.

"If this project is going to go ahead, it's going to go ahead because the province is prepared to step up," Tibbits said. "If we don't get the money from the province, we're not going anywhere in the short term."

Cambridge is the biggest part of a plan that also changes around programs at Guelph, Waterloo and Doon campuses. Each campus will focus on specific areas of study, called centres of excellence.

The Cambridge green field is only a stone's throw from Doon campus.

Under the plan, a new Cambridge site would become Centre of Excellence in Welding, Robotics and Automation; Electronics/Telecommunications and Information Technology; Civil, Construction and Architectural Engineering Technologies; and Sustainable Green Energy and Applied Research.

Doon alone would become the centre for health-care education, in fields like radiology technology.

In Guelph, the transportation trades would grow.

"We could centralize, move things out of that campus; be able to grow a transportation trade centre in Guelph and probably add another 10 or 11 programs," Tibbits said.

Of the total \$71.4-million cost, the college is asking the province to contribute \$26.7 million and the federal government, \$13.5 million.

The City of Cambridge, which owns 54 hectares (136 acres) of green field, would be asked to donate the land. Conestoga has a five-year option to buy the land.

"On our council, there is a lot of support for the college," said Craig, who supports the city contributing land to the project. "We need skilled individuals within this region to call upon, in terms of industry and the type of industry that's coming here now," he said.

"Cambridge, as an example, has 50 per cent of the industrial assessment within our borders, so we're particularly affected by the shortage of skills."

The land is important to the ambitions of both Cambridge and Conestoga, Craig said. It's probably "the prime visible land on the 401 between here and Windsor," he said.

But other governments must also do their part, he said. Craig will be pushing the Region for a commitment.

"I think it (Conestoga) needs more support from the regional government and the local government in trying to see its goals fulfilled."

For his part, Milloy said he can't commit the government to the plan, though it fits with the province's priority to address the skills shortage and retrain workers.

"Certainly I'm familiar with the Conestoga proposal. I think it's an exciting one. It's one that's moving in the right direction, but . . . we're going to have to weigh everything," he said.

Conestoga's plan is one of a number of proposals that Milloy has received from Ontario colleges.

"As minister, one of my priorities is looking at how we can continue to deal with the skills needs across the province. We're looking at all of them, working with the different colleges to see them developed more and then trying to look at that overlay of where are the needs within Ontario.

"I can't give firm timelines as to when final decisions will be made. This is part of an ongoing process and dialogue."

Tibbits said Conestoga has an opportunity to become the skills training centre for Ontario.

A true knowledge economy includes skilled workers, he said.

"To me the knowledge economy means taking people who are already in the workforce and having them better themselves. It's reducing high school dropout rates. It's increasing participation rates. That to me will make it a really vibrant community."

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