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LOCAL NEWS



Don't be afraid

Former Hawks player talks mental health at NIU nonprofit event / 4

LOCAL NEWS

Turning the tide

DeKalb County awarded \$900K federal grant to fight opioid crisis / 5

LOCAL NEWS



Owner dies

Tapa La Luna restaurant closes after DeKalb man has heart attack / 2

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\$23M SITE ON HORIZON

NIU announces partnership, plans new research facility / 3

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TODAY'S WEATHER



HIGH
74 **LOW**
42

A strong cold front will move through in the afternoon. Showers and thunderstorms are likely, and will precede another temperature drop.

Complete forecast on page 7

IF YOU BUILD IT ...

NIU announces partnership, plans for \$23 million research facility

By **KELSEY RETTKE**
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DeKALB – It’s a partnership so big that it’ll start with a \$23 million, 30,000-square-foot building on Northern Illinois University’s campus, and it warranted the governor stopping by to help announce it.

A news conference was held Tuesday at Barsema Alumni and Visitors Center to announce that NIU has joined the Illinois Innovation Network, in partnership with the University of Illinois system.

Of the \$500 million committed in the spring to IIN, \$15 million will go toward a state-of-the-art facility on the far-west end of campus, Gov. Bruce Rauner said. NIU will foot the other \$7.9 million through in-kind contributions, private investment and donations, according to a news release from the university.

“NIU is one of the great research universities across America,” Rauner said, citing the university’s leadership in sustainability research as a founding reason for the partnership.

NIU President Lisa Freeman said the building, dubbed the Northern Illinois Center for Community Sustainability, will feature cutting-edge laboratories, classrooms and collaborative spaces.

Additionally, the 20-acre plot will provide space for greenhouses and field sites. An Allied Environmental Policy Institute and Environmental Law Clinic also are planned. Freeman said NIU’s three foci through the partnership will be food systems, water resources and climate change.

“The goals are ambitious,” Freeman said, “to be a local leader in food systems, climate change and water research; to develop a talent pipeline for all aspects of community sustainability; to attract new sources of funding to support basic and applied research; education and workforce development; and to drive innovation and economic development.”

NIU is the first non-University of Illinois institution to join the network, and is the fourth hub across the state, which also includes U of I campuses in Urbana-Champaign, Chicago and Springfield.

A facility similar to the one that will be built in DeKalb will be erected in Champaign-Urbana, and then the other campuses will follow. Each center will capitalize on their respective university’s strengths.

Freeman said the next steps here will include focusing on architectural and engineering issues in the next year, with



hopes to have the facility up and running in fall 2021, and no later than 2022.

The IIN is the product of an expansive state-funded initiative led by the U of I system to catalyze economic growth and focus institutional research to develop solutions, promote entrepreneurship and empower investors. It is housed at the Discovery Partners Institute in Chicago.

Rauner declared the network “one of the highest economic potential projects for the state of Illinois,” saying technology and innovation drive economic growth.

“We have an extraordinary opportunity to lead the nation in this,” he said.

DeKalb Mayor Jerry Smith professed the center to have “marvelous potential” and called NIU an “economic engine.”

Rauner said funding for this project almost is entirely state-driven.

“We fought hard in the General Assembly and got half a billion dollars committed to expand the U of I around the state,” he said.

U of I President Timothy Killeen said the statewide initiative is “not just a wise investment, it’s the best investment,” because it touches on retention



ABOVE: Northern Illinois University President Lisa Freeman speaks Tuesday as Gov. Bruce Rauner looks on at the Barsema Alumni and Visitors Center at NIU.

LEFT: Gov. Bruce Rauner and DeKalb Mayor Jerry Smith share a laugh before the announcement of NIU’s involvement in the Illinois Innovation Network in partnership with the University of Illinois system.

Photos by Mark Busch – mbusch@shawmedia.com

versities.”

Rauner said more resources for the U of I system will attract even more students with more affordable tuition costs.

Another projected byproduct of the IIN is the creation of a network of student entrepreneurs, inventors, researchers and innovative technology thinkers to provide real-world experience before they graduate, and to tackle global issues.

“It’s all about the students,” Killeen said. “Students will be vectors to enliven this network, they’ll get internships, jobs, and have careers and families in Illinois.”

and recruitment as well – key concerns in DeKalb, where NIU has seen its enrollment fall 5 percent since last year and about 30 percent in the past 11 years.

In a news conference after the announcement, Rauner spoke about enrollment concerns, saying he wants to do for higher education what he did for K-12, in which the funding formula was overhauled.

“But with two additions,” Rauner said. “More money and a new allocation funding formula, and get rid of mandates to reduce overhead costs for uni-