Keiser eyes big growth at new WPB campus; plans taking shape

Posted: 11:48 a.m. Thursday, Aug. 13, 2015

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Keiser University in West Palm Beach Wednesday, March 18, 2015. (Bruce R. Bennett / The Palm Beach Post)

Tom Duncan, Belinda Keiser and Arthur Keiser at Keiser University in West Palm Beach on Wednesday, August 12, 2015. (Bruce R. Bennett / The Palm Beach Post)

Keiser University has big plans for its new 100-acre campus in West Palm Beach, formerly home to Northwood University.

Although Northwood focused exclusively on business, Keiser wants to bring in sciences, especially nursing programs, and boost the school’s presence in Palm Beach County. Keiser was founded in 1977 to serve adult students seeking a career-focused education. But the university has long sought to broaden its base to teach younger students, and the Northwood University acquisition offered the school a chance to move quickly in that direction.

Having a leafy campus offering dormitories, sports and activities greatly helps Keiser appeal to young students, university officials said in an interview Aug. 12.

In fact, some 580 students will start school at the new West Palm Beach campus on Aug. 31.

Arthur Keiser and Belinda Keiser at Keiser University in West Palm Beach on Wednesday, August 12, 2015. (Bruce R. Bennett / The Palm Beach Post)
Keiser University first thought its long-sought campus would be at the project now known as Avenir, in Palm Beach Gardens. A few years ago, developers of the property approached Keiser officials about building a large campus there on 200 acres, for about 4,000 students.

When the project met resistance from city officials, and neighbors worried about traffic, congestion and density issues, Keiser decided to look elsewhere. Coincidentally, Northwood was poised to close the West Palm Beach campus.

Keiser scooped up the property for $30.5 million in March.

“This is a much better location in the middle of West Palm Beach,” said Dr. Arthur Keiser, chancellor. The Northwood campus “is a natural evolution of our intuition and will provide a cultural center for our institution, too. We’re excited about the future.”

Having a campus was especially important to parents of foreign students, who wanted their children to be in a safe environment, Dr. Keiser said. In fact, “we have 50 Chinese students moving in next week,” he said.

The property has 284,000 square feet of buildings, but only uses about 30 percent of the 100 acres, said campus president Dr. Tom Duncan.

“That’s quite a lot of land,” Dr. Duncan said. And it’s going to be used over time as Keiser expands its presence in West Palm Beach.

For instance, Keiser has 300 dormitory beds, “but we’ll need to grow” and build more dorms, Dr. Keiser said.
A five-year-plan at the Northwood property already is in place, and vice chancellor Belinda Keiser did not rule out that the school’s headquarters might one day move there. About 180 employees work at the school’s Fort Lauderdale office of the chancellor.

For now, other changes are more imminent.

The College of Golf is already moving to the new campus, from a location in Port St. Lucie. About 20 acres are set aside for the College of Golf, and putting surfaces and a chipping green are being built as part of Keiser’s program to teach students the business of golf.

(Keiser will maintain a presence in Port St. Lucie, however. It is constructing a new campus on nine acres in Tradition. The $16 million land and building investment will result in the building’s completion within about 18 months, said Kelli Lane, associate vice chancellor.

Also in the works for the new West Palm Beach campus is a chiropractic school, as well as a bachelor of science program for nursing. The bachelor of science nursing degree program will be offered starting in January, Dr. Duncan said.

Over time, Keiser hopes to build a new building that will contain the chiropractic and nursing schools, as well as other health and science related programs, Dr. Duncan said.

Aerospace, trade and distribution also are being considered for programs at the new West Palm Beach campus, Dr. Duncan said.

Also in the works: A Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, to strengthen students’ global leadership abilities, Belinda Keiser said.

Tailoring each campus to its community is important, she said. The university counts on local business advisers to offer ideas for programs needed in the area.

The large ship repair businesses in Riviera Beach is on the radar, for instance, and Dr. Duncan has been meeting with marine industry officials about the need for skilled labor for yacht repair and upkeep.

Keiser officials also are weighing whether to move the main entrance to Village Boulevard from 2600 N. Military Trail, where it is now.
The private university was a for-profit company until converting to nonprofit in 2011. Belinda Keiser said conversion to the nonprofit model always was in the cards, but the move also followed intense scrutiny of for-profit universities by the federal government.

Keiser University has 17 other campuses in Florida, as well as campuses in Nicaragua and China. In West Palm Beach, it also has an adult-learning campus at the Vista Center. Keiser serves nearly 20,000 students offering 100 degrees at the doctoral through associate level.