NEWS

Southern New England School of Law may donate assets to UMass Dartmouth and become the first public law school in Mass.

By: **Matt Rocheleau** | November 03, 2009 |

The University of Massachusetts recently reentered discussions to add a public law school nearly four years after a similar proposal was approved by the Board of Trustees only to be rejected several months later by the state higher education board.

Trustees approved the addition of Southern New England School of Law (SNESL) to the UMass system in late 2004, a measure which would have removed Massachusetts from a list of six states in the country without a public law school. However, amid controversy, higher education officials voted against approving the plan the following spring.

Last month, the idea was revived when Dartmouth-based SNESL offered to discuss a potential donation of its assets to the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth.

Under the terms of the possible donation, expressed in an Oct. 5 letter from the law school's Board of Trustees Chair Margaret D. Xifaras to University President Jack M. Wilson, UMass would receive a total offer valued at $22.6 million between cash assets and the law school's campus that now houses 235 students, according to a statement from University officials.

Wilson said in the statement the University would launch a comprehensive review process of what he called "a very generous offer."

He said he has asked officials at UMass Dartmouth to review the relevant academic, financial and legal issues and to put forward a proposal based on SNESL's donation letter. Wilson added that UMass system officials would then engage in an extensive due-diligence review process.

UMass Dartmouth Chancellor Jean F. MacCormack, who described the potential donation offer as "extraordinarily generous," said in the statement, "We have a wonderful chance to expand higher education opportunity in Massachusetts by accepting this historic donation and building an innovative public law school that offers an excellent and affordable education for students."

According to the statement from University officials, Xifaras wrote in her letter, "Our aspiration and objective is to resource and empower the University to carry forward with our historic mission and commitment to provide affordable, accessible and excellent legal education to a diverse group of students who might not otherwise have this opportunity."

When the proposal to add a public law school was last being considered several years ago, Suffolk University Law School and New England School of Law, two private law schools, were among the idea's most-vocal opponents, and some accused members of the state Board of Higher Education – who voted 8 to 3 against adding a public law school – of conspiring with private law schools in Massachusetts to block the measure.

Under the terms of the proposal rejected in 2005, the University of Massachusetts School of Law – as it would have been called – would have been self-supporting, meaning that no state funds and no UMass revenue, with the exception of the funds generated by the law school itself, would have been used to

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support the law school's operations.

SNESL has state and regional accreditation, and the previous proposal said the school would have sought national accreditation from the American Bar Association.

In 2004, the law school's tuition was $19,000 a year and officials said that tuition level would not be lowered, had the measure been approved. SNESL students currently pay around $21,800 annually for tuition.

In the prior plan, Wilson had called for academic collaborations between the public law school and each of the University's five campuses, including Amherst.

Other states without public law schools include nearby Rhode Island, New Hampshire and Vermont, along with Delaware. Alaska has no private or public law schools.

Matt Rocheleau can be reached at mrochele@dailycollegian.com.

One Response to "Southern New England School of Law may donate assets to UMass Dartmouth and become the first public law school in Mass."

Ed says:

November 3, 2009 at 10:35 am

The ONLY advantage of a public law school, like public colleges in general, is that the tuition is considerably lower than private schools.

If the tuition is to remain the same, why exactly do we want a public law school, particularly a public law school that isn't even ABA certified (read no out-of-state students because they can't take their home state bar exams).

Why are we doing this? Let the place go bankrupt and buy it at the auction….

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