

Faculty, admin set to discuss budget cuts, class size
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REAL ESTATE

FORECLOSURES BRING INTEREST IN E.L. RENTAL PROPERTIES

By Zack Colman
THE STATE NEWS

The 500-block of Spartan Avenue, situated a block south of Burcham Drive and three streets west of Hagadorn Road, isn't exactly prime real estate for MSU students making a move off campus.

Matt Hagan, an agent with Hagan Realty, usually wouldn't lease properties that far from campus. But when two rental properties on Spartan Avenue's 500-block became available following a sheriff's deed auction, Hagan couldn't resist.

"We haven't seen a lot of quality properties become available," Hagan said. "The 500-block of Spartan isn't something we're normally looking to buy in, but that particular deal was too good to pass up."

And although giving ownership rights to a buyer of a foreclosed home at a sheriff's auction — filings declined 8 percent during 2009 in Ingham County, East Lansing generally has been able to avoid foreclosure because 63 percent of its housing units are renter-occupied. In 2009, there were 1,701 sheriff's deeds filings compared to 1,841 in 2008, but East Lansing claimed only 35 of the county's 2,009 numbers.

Robin Sims, 51, of Brighton, bought a home at 329 Center St. in 2001 and leases it to students. Even though 329 Center St. has had occupants each semester since Sims acquired the house, it's nerve-wracking thinking about when the next year's lease will be signed, she said.

But Spartan Avenue is another world away — and Center Street's proximity to campus is why Sims secured the four-person dwelling.

"Location, location, location," Sims emphasized. "If you're going to buy a place, the university isn't going anywhere. Search until you find a good enough one to be able to buy to rent it out."

There should be plenty of options for potential buyers, as East Lansing housing vacancies have risen since 2000, when 892 of the city's 15,318 housing units

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MSU looks to the future with expansion



Cell and molecular biology graduate student Rachel Miller reaches for a beaker while working on the regulation of oil biosynthesis in algae on Thursday at the Biochemistry Building. Miller is one of the students that works with professor Christoph Benning on the project that potentially could be moved to the Plant and Soil Sciences Building after the expansion.
ANGELI WRIGHT/ THE STATE NEWS

"What we're doing is not just cutting back things, we're trying to reorganize the university and invest in things we're strong in."

David DeWitt, associate dean of budget, planning and research for the College of Natural Science

By Zane McMillin
THE STATE NEWS

In the coming months, MSU will navigate difficult waters as it makes decisions regarding the fate of dozens of academic programs and specializations. For Christoph Benning, however, a much brighter future is on the horizon.

Benning, a professor of biochemistry and molecular biology, is one of many instructors and researchers who stands to gain from the MSU Board of Trustees' Dec. 4 approval of a \$43.2 million expansion to the Plant and Soil Sciences Building. The project will include a new auditorium and two floors of laboratory space, as well as rooms for growing plant specimens.

"We envision this space is going to be very modern, very beautiful, basically representing plant biology on campus," Benning said. "Plant biology is very important to MSU."

Construction on the multimillion-dollar facility is scheduled to begin in mid-May and wrap up by March 2012. The expansion was approved less than two months after Fred Poston, MSU vice president for finance and operations, announced a scaling back of campus construction and repair projects in light of budget uncertainties.

But what makes this project different, MSU officials said, is that it will represent MSU's investments in the future and a place where multiple academic disciplines will intersect and collaborate.

Recession investments

With the attached price tag, MSU officials said it stands to reason people might wonder why large amounts of money are being spent in light of potential academic cuts, increasing tuition and shrinking budgets.

"If you don't invest in your future, you don't have any future," said David DeWitt, associate dean of budget, planning and research for the College of Natural Science.

"What we're doing is not just cutting back things, we're trying to reorganize the university and invest in things we're strong in."

The expansion, which will connect the Plant and Soil Sciences Building with the Plant Biology Laboratories, will be paid for using tax-free bonds and using money from MSU's general fund.

Poston said the university typically pays off the bonds during a 20-year period.

He said in spite of MSU's future budget uncertainties, the university's reputation in plant-related sciences, combined with a new facility that potentially might attract more grant money and more faculty, justifies the expansion's cost.

"Many of the federal grants that we receive are dependent on having appropriate research facilities," Poston said in an e-mail. "We believe that it is imperative that we upgrade facilities to maintain our scientific reputation."

Going for grants

DeWitt said one grant in particular practically justifies the expansion itself.

The Great Lakes Bioenergy Research Center, or GLBRC, which came to MSU in 2008, will bring about \$50 million during a period of five years to the university and might be moved, at least partially, into

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To see renderings of the Plant and Soil Sciences expansion visit stateneews.com/multimedia.

EAST LANSING

Officials optimistic despite developer's debt

By Zack Colman
THE STATE NEWS

With City Center II's financial status the same in the fiscal year as it was in 2009, East Lansing officials remain optimistic about Strathmore Development Company's \$16.4 million project.

City Manager Ted Staton said Strathmore still owes nearly \$66,000 in city taxes on six of its seven parcels. He said those taxes should be paid by the end of January, pointing to positive discussions with developer Scott Chappelle.

"Taxes will be paid in full and nothing will be done in terms of processing the planning requests until all taxes are paid in full," Staton said.

However, such statements have been made before. The city said Strathmore would meet a Dec. 17

deadline to renew City Center II's site plan and special use permits, but failed to pay taxes in time. Strathmore paid about \$41,000 of its city taxes in October for the property at 100 W. Grand River Ave., but has yet to make another dent in its debt.

Chappelle declined an interview, but said in an e-mail that he plans to alter the special use permit "to accommodate additional tenant demand" and will honor all taxes.

But Strathmore's financial woes double when adding county taxes. Strathmore owes about \$68,000 to Ingham County, and on March 1 interest on those delinquent taxes will increase from 1 percent to 1.5 percent per month.

All properties will go into foreclosure in March 2011 if 2008 county taxes are not paid. If this occurred, the entire planning pro-

cess would begin over again.

But East Lansing Planning and Community Development Director Tim Dempsey said many developers have few options for financing projects.

Although about \$200,000 in taxes looks small compared to the project's total bill, obtaining a loan for a project of City Center II's size is increasingly difficult as banks have tightened credit lines. Dempsey said many developers take the 3 percent hit on late property taxes rather than a loan with 8 percent interest, which still would not cover the development's needs.

Dempsey said if the city had been more expedient in approving construction for the

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COMMUNITY

Greek probation comes to an end

By David Barker
THE STATE NEWS

Less than two months after the alcohol-related deaths of two MSU fraternity members prompted the Greek community to prohibit houses from hosting parties of any kind, the self-imposed social probation has ended.

Interfraternity Council, or IFC, President Bill Zajac and Panhellenic Council President Kait Rector said each house was required to submit a revised social policy to its respective council for consideration for removal from social probation.

Although each plan differed slightly depending on the house's national affiliation, there were consistent steps taken across the board, Zajac said.

"Some of the things (houses will need to do) are register par-

ties with IFC and the East Lansing Police Department," he said. "Parties will also have to be approved 48 hours in advance (and) guest lists will also be required."

Greek leaders started the probation in November following the deaths of Alpha Epsilon Pi's business sophomore Ryan Rosman and Alpha Gamma Rho environmental soil science and chemistry senior Brian McMillen last semester.

The IFC oversees 25 fraternity chapters at MSU and the Panhellenic Council oversees 13 sorority chapters.

Additional modifications include no open serving of alcohol at parties and checking guest identification at the door, Zajac said. Despite the extra requirements, Rector said members of the Greek community viewed the probation as a time for reflection

rather than a punishment. "Everyone knew it wasn't for punishment," Rector said. "It was that our entire campus needed to step back and double-check what was going on."

However, each house also will experience more in-depth house checks and stiffer punishments for rule breaking, Zajac said. He said severe or repeated infractions could result in a house losing all social privileges, but did not identify other potential punishments.

In addition to lifting the probation, members of the Greek community will be required to participate with drug and alcohol abuse prevention programs in conjunction with in-house awareness programs.

"We're working with (the Greek community) on page 2