

Chronicle, The (Willimantic, CT)

## Plan for UConn rec center concerns Mansfield officials Dorm would be torn down for new building

COREY SIPE

Published: March 7, 2016

Chronicle Staff Writer STORRS - While town officials have voiced opposition to plans to tear down a dormitory so a new recreation center can be built at the University of Connecticut, the state has not indicated it will reverse course. **UConn** plans to construct a 200,000-square-foot student recreation center across from the **UConn** Co-op bookstore. Mansfield Town Manager Matthew Hart said the town submitted written documentation March 1 opposing the project to the state's Environmental Quality Agency, which advertised the recreation center as a "scoping project." That designation allows a state agency to provide a preliminary concept of a project and ask for feedback from other agencies and the public through a meeting or submitting comments via mail, e-mail or by fax. The public had a chance to send comments to Paul Ferri, an environmental compliance professional who works at the university. Ferri said the deadline was March 3 and comments received were from four entities including, the Town of Mansfield, the state Department of Health, Department of Energy and Environmental Protection and a private citizen were "basically expected." Hart wrote "we are seeing enrollment increase on campus, but the number of beds hasn't kept up with enrollment. The undergrads need a place to live." (**UConn** rec center plan, Page 4) (Continued from Page 1) Preliminary plans indicate the facility will feature a cardiovascular and strength training center, squash and racquetball courts, basketball courts, a running track, multiple-use sports area, an aquatics center, a wellness center, spaces for club sports, both inside and outside and meeting space. The **UConn** Board of Trustees unanimously approved \$11 million to plan and design the \$100 million center at its Feb. 24 meeting. It is expected that bonding will be backed by student fees. The recreation center would dwarf the 70,000-square-foot basketball champion's center, which cost \$34 million, mostly funded by donations received from the **UConn** Foundation. Construction would require the demolition of Connecticut Commons, a 435-bed dormitory on Hillside and Whitney Roads, and necessitate underground utility modifications. Demolition is scheduled for this fall, with project bidding to occur in January 2017, construction beginning in April 2017 and completion by July 2019. **UConn** officials this morning addressed the town's concern regarding bed space for new students. **UConn** spokesman Stephanie Reitz said a new 725-bed Next Generation Connecticut Hall, also known as the STEM Residence Hall, will "add 285 net of new beds to campus, meaning **UConn's** housing stock can absorb the loss of Connecticut Commons." Mansfield officials noted the university had plans to build a 650-bed Honors residence hall as part of a South Campus development plan, but it has since been canceled. According to a Feb. 9 **UConn** public hearing narrative, the university decided in September 2015 to defer the project so it could "further evaluate operating budget impacts, student enrollment and the impact of private, off-campus housing developments." Reitz added the project was also put on hold due to "lack of state operating funds since housing is tied to enrollment, which is tied to state allocation." Mansfield officials wrote in their letter that "over the last five years, full-time undergraduate enrollment at the university has increased by 9 percent; in contrast, the number of students living on campus has increased by only 1 percent," adding the university's goal of increasing undergraduate enrollment is 5,000 over the next 10 years. Many of the town's owner-occupied homes have been transformed to rental units, the letter stated. Responding to those comments, Reitz said she believes the university can meet its current on-campus housing needs with the Next Generation Connecticut Hall, adding some

students prefer to live off-campus. While Hart said the town had an understanding with **UConn** it would supply 70 percent of undergraduate **housing** needs on its campus, Reitz said approximately 72 percent of undergraduates will live on-campus when Next Generation Connecticut Hall opens. The town wrote the university had also looked at the Y lot, to the rear of the South Campus Residence Halls, and the existing field house, as two possible sites for the recreation center, which would not have taken away on-campus **housing**. Reitz said the decision to use the current site of Connecticut Commons was made since it would have the least environmental impact." It's a much more involved process if it's property that has never been built on," Reitz said.

Copyright 2016 The Chronicle Printing Company. All Rights Reserved

» **Archives Technical and Billing questions:** For questions regarding your Archives account, please send an email to [thechronicle@newsbank.com](mailto:thechronicle@newsbank.com).