

Everette Freeman plugs Higher Education in Albany, GA

(ALBANY, GA - January 18, 2008) — Everette Freeman plugged his school. He plugged Albany. He plugged all of Albany's institutions of higher learning, whose intellectual capital ought to advance the city's reputation as a "college town," he said. Then he plugged the way all of them connect during a speech to Albany Rotary Club members Thursday.

Gov. Sonny Perdue on Wednesday unveiled a budget that included \$11 million for Albany institutions — \$1.5 million for Albany State University to design its Ray Charles Fine Arts Center, a \$27 million project, and \$9.5 million for Albany Technical College to construct "Building K," a multi-use student center.

Both projects have been desired for years, and both eventually were slashed from last year's state budget.

Freeman urged the group, which included many of the city's top business and civic leaders, to show their support for both projects to their legislators, and not just for students' sake. Local builders, and later local vendors are likely to benefit, he said.

"And it truly means that all of us win, to the extent that we're able to lend support to these projects, to urge our very excellent legislators in Atlanta, to keep those items in the budget until it's approved," Freeman said.

When the buildings open, it means more faculty and staff who will buy and furnish homes, pay for utilities and pay taxes, he said.

"Before you know it, we've got the multiplier that continues to make our city vital," he said.

Freeman did not leave the podium without speaking about race, and fielding a couple of tough questions from Rotary Club members.

"Race matters in this town, it really matters, in a way that it shouldn't," he said.

"We haven't yet fully embraced the idea that we can be a community, and that's on both sides of the racial divide."

But, speaking to the predominantly white club, "The last thing that I need to do on the side of the racial divide is make you feel guilty," he said.

A couple of Rotary members raised issues of Albany State's football stadium and Darton College when Freeman asked for questions.

A bank declared a final balloon payment of \$2.3 million on a three-year interest-only construction loan to build the stadium due in August 2007, Freeman said. It has not been paid.

The rest of expected funding for the stadium, a project which began before Freeman's tenure, did not materialize, he said. "Roy Barnes lost and the world changed," he said.

While the college has been able to service its debt, "we do not have the dollars to pay that off," he said.

Freeman had been asked about Darton College, a two-year college in Albany, not long after he was named the university's president two years ago, he said. Albany State University, a historically black college, is metro Albany's only four-year school.

"I would walk hand-in-hand with you and (Darton president) Dr. Peter Sireno to the Board of Regents and demand that Darton become a four-year college, if we had no room to take another Darton student," he said.

The Board of Regents, which governs the University System of Georgia, seeks greater collaboration between its "access" institutions and its "comprehensive" universities when it caps enrollment at the state's research universities — Georgia Tech, Georgia State and the University of Georgia, he said.

Since he arrived, Freeman has established several contracts with nearby access institutions, which guarantee enrollment and credit transfer at ASU for those college's students, he said.

Courtesy of Albany Herald