

Pennsylvania university looks to sell dorms to lessen 'financial strain'

By Anthony Hennen

Apr 15, 2022

(The Center Square) – As the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education adjusts to the merging of some of its colleges, selling dorms could be on the table.

At the latest PASSHE Board of Governors meeting, officials discussed the selling off of two Edinburg University dorm buildings built in 2011. The university only had a 57.8 percent occupancy rate during the fall semester.

High school graduate levels have fallen off in recent years, and it's hit the PASSHE system hard: enrollment has **declined by 21.6%** since 2010-11, falling from about 120,000 students to about 94,000.

“The low occupancy rates have created financial strain on the auxiliary operations, resulting in the housing program experiencing annual deficits,” the Board of Governors’ agenda **states**. “Divesting two of the housing facilities, Highlands 7 & 8 is a key strategy to support long-term financial sustainability for the housing operations for Edinboro University, as outlined in its sustainability planning.”

Highlands 7 and 8 have not housed students since 2019. The university looks to “sell the property for development compatible with its mission while also improving its financial situation,” the document reads.

The Board of Governors approved Edinboro’s request, though it must also be approved by the General Assembly, the Department of General Services, and the city of Edinboro.

A decade ago, Edinboro **announced** a \$115 million plan to replace dorms and dining halls. Other PASSHE schools, such as Indiana University of Pennsylvania, launched a \$250 million “residential revival” plan. The Pittsburgh Tribune-Review noted that “\$1.39 billion in debt remains on residence halls at 13 of 14 universities,” with only Cheyney University not engaging in a “building boom.”

Critics have argued against campus construction for years, but the combination of enrollment declines and the pandemic have made over-construction a bigger issue.

“Don't spend [federal money] on more buildings. Spend it on people to work in the buildings we already have,” Matthew Read **argued** for Inside Higher Ed in 2008. Intercollege competition drives the desire for new and updated buildings. “Colleges frightened of losing tuition dollars feel constant pressure to spend on expensive facilities to compete for students, in the process greatly increasing the danger of becoming even more insecure financially, maybe hopelessly so,” Neal McCluskey of the Cato Institute **wrote**.