

Building begins: Valencia Poinciana to open fall 2017

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This is a rendering of what the new Valencia College campus in Poinciana is going to look like from the outside. Photo/Valencia College

By Ken Jackson

Staff Writer

Ground broke Thursday morning on the new Poinciana campus for Valencia College.

It was also the culmination of a process moved by strong faith at all levels — the college, the county, the state capitol and Gov. Rick Scott's desk. Students in south Osceola County who don't have personal transportation won't have to endure bus rides of over two hours each way once the initial 65,000 square-foot building opens for classes in the fall of 2017.

It took three years of legislative sessions to bring home the \$22 million needed to create Osceola County's second Valencia campus, closer to the hundreds of students at Poinciana, Liberty and New Dimensions high schools who graduate every spring. Kathleen Plinske, president of Valencia's Osceola, Lake Nona campuses, has been quoting the stats for

years that those students haven't been going on to college in the same percentages as their Central Florida cohorts.

And now that the 19 acres at Reaves Road and Pleasant Hill Road will soon be pad-ready and has builders ready to go — architects DLR Group and construction manager Clancy & Theys — she can finally breathe easy knowing the arduous waiting game is over.

“We knew nothing’s a given, but all along we knew we had the support at all levels for this,” she said. “I’d call most of what we felt ‘nervous optimism.’ Leaders at all levels said their faith that Thursday would come never wavered.

“It was just a question of when,” said Valencia President Sandy Shugart. “We had the faith in Darren and Mike (Soto and La Rosa, Osceola’s legislators in Tallahassee). It was actually faster than we thought. “In my 16 years, there likely hasn’t been a better or more important day that today. These are days we celebrate — exactly why we were created 47 years ago.”

Said Board of Trustees Chairman Lew Oliver: “We had the best case of anywhere in the state, brilliant stewardship of the funds and the data for the specific need for our Hispanic students.”

A crowd of about 250 community members joined Valencia College officials and members of local and state government at the ceremonial groundbreaking, and gave Plinske a nearly one-minute ovation when called to speak.

“We are so excited about the opportunities this campus will bring,” she said. “The addition of a Poinciana campus will have a tremendous impact on our college-going rates of high-school graduates that was low not because of lack of talent, desire or preparation, but simply a lack of access.”

Osceola County donated the land, which Shugart said sparked momentum for the project. From there, he lauded the leadership and work of folks like Soto, La Rosa and John Cortes (D-Kissimmee), who fought the fight in Tallahassee.

“They worked tirelessly and together to ensure the funds were brought home to the county at a time when many projects were getting vetoed or delayed and similar projects faced scrutiny,” Shugart said. “A great community asset is built by the whole community.”

Oliver lauded the bi-partisan effort of those in Tallahassee.

“We need to thank the work of (Senate President) Andy Gardiner, (Speaker of the House) Steve Crisafulli, and at the top, the governor has to sign the bill. This was not a tough sell for him. He went to a community college. “For students like those who live in Poinciana, the difference between a successful and difficult life is in the field behind us.”

Stacy Venable, a 2013 Poinciana High graduate who will graduate Valencia next year, showed off that difference.

“It took me 45 minutes, or over an hour if I had to go to the West campus,” she said. “It took forever to get there. My drive this morning took five minutes.”