

Talk of move north worries SeaTech staff, students in Dania Beach

By Scott Travis
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DANIA BEACH - Just steps away from the shore and half an hour from Florida Atlantic University's main campus in Boca Raton, SeaTech is considered by some to be the ideal spot to maintain an ocean engineering research center.

The 50,000-square-foot facility has docking space for automated underwater vehicles, a pipe to transfer seawater and various laboratories housing research projects under way.

But as FAU faces a cutback in funding from the state and is undergoing a review of how to operate cheaper and more efficiently, SeaTech could have to vacate its Dania Beach facility. It would move 116 miles north to the 600-acre Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute in Fort Pierce. Last year, the university acquired Harbor Branch, which focuses on marine mammal and biology research.

FAU officials say it's one of many ideas being studied, but some at SeaTech are worried.

"There's no proposal on the table that's an appropriate replacement for SeaTech," said Richard Granata, an ocean engineering professor at SeaTech. "If they want to build a bigger, brighter place here, that's fine. But SeaTech's the next best thing we have now."

SeaTech faculty say some research can't be replicated easily at Harbor Branch. SeaTech is on the Atlantic Ocean, and Harbor Branch is on the Intracoastal Waterway, where the water is more brackish, said center director Manhar Dhanak.

SeaTech is also closer to the Gulf Stream, which is due to be harnessed for a state-funded ocean energy project. The state Board of Governors gave the university \$5 million for the project in 2006. Legislators allocated the project \$8.75 million two weeks ago.

SeaTech officials also worry about what would happen to faculty, staff and students.

"SeaTech is easy for me because of the shuttle from Boca Raton," said Mohammad Farooq, a doctoral student from West Palm Beach. "Harbor Branch is far, far away."

Right now, students in an undergraduate ocean engineering program take their first three years of classes at FAU's Boca Raton campus and then go to SeaTech to design vessels they test in the ocean. A shuttle transports students from the Boca Raton campus to SeaTech, about 28 miles south. Harbor Branch is almost 100 miles from Boca Raton, which would make a shuttle impractical.

Dhanak said military and business experts have told him that when a major employer moves out of the area, fewer than 30 percent of employees will follow.

"People have roots here," Dhanak said. "You'd lose your expertise. You'd maintain the positions, but the expertise is gone."

SeaTech was a vacant shopping center called SeaFair before FAU took it over in 1997. Dania Beach owns the land, and FAU owns the facility. The university spent about \$13 million to buy and renovate the property. The city leases the land to the university at no charge, officials said.

The idea to merge SeaTech with Harbor Branch came out of discussions with FAU administrators and a task force looking into ways to reduce costs.

FAU anticipates its budget may be \$13 million to \$16 million less in 2008-09 than it was at the beginning of this year. But the budget task force is looking beyond the current budget crisis and is seeking permanent ways to reduce costs, including shutting down satellite campuses. FAU has seven campuses, including sites in Jupiter, Davie, Fort Lauderdale and Port St. Lucie.

"We know we're spread out all over the place, and there's an administrative cost to have a presence all over," said Tim Lenz, a political science professor on the task force. He added that he doesn't yet know whether a merger of SeaTech and Harbor Branch would make sense.

SeaTech has about 35 employees, receives \$2.9 million in state money for regular operating expenses and serves about 70 students.

The operating budget for Harbor Branch, with 150 employees, is \$8 million, FAU officials said.

SeaTech collected about \$11.5 million in research dollars last year. Dhanak said 90 percent of the research grants come from the Office of Naval Research. Navy officials could not be reached to comment, despite attempts by phone.

Dhanak said the university might save on security, but he sees few others savings in moving to Harbor Branch, unless the university scaled back on the research being done.

Norman Kaufman, associate provost for FAU, said the idea of a merger is in the early discussion stages.

"This is a trial balloon raised in the context of how can FAU reshape and reinvent itself, given the prognosis of the state budget now and the foreseeable future will leave us with very constrained resources," he said.

Since FAU recently acquired Harbor Branch, he said, it was logical to see whether there was a way to combine forces with the university's ocean engineering department.

"It might take two or three years to reach closure on this," Kaufman said, "if it takes shape at all."

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