

Recession Crimps Plans For New Law Schools

BY AMANDA BRONSTAD

A SLOWDOWN in contributions, coupled with state budget cuts, has clipped the wings of nearly a dozen fledgling law schools nationwide, including three in New York state.

Given the economic climate, some institutions that had planned to open law schools in 2010 are considering pushing back those start dates. Others are scaling back building plans and fundraisings.

At St. John Fisher College in Rochester, a proposal to start a law school has been tabled.

St. John Fisher received \$2.5 million from New York state last year but needs another \$26 million to open, according to spokeswoman Anne Geer.

"Obviously, we need to factor into that the current economic situation," she said.

And the future of two proposed law schools within the State University of New York remains uncertain.

SUNY's five-year capital budget, approved last year, identified hundreds of building projects, including \$45 million for a new building for a law school at Stony Brook University on Long Island and additional money to study the feasibility of a law school at Binghamton University, said SUNY spokesman David Henahan.

Last month, Albany cut \$118 million from SUNY's operating budget. While those cuts did not directly affect existing capital projects, the law school buildings have not yet been financed, Mr. Henahan said.

In Pineville, La., Tim Johnson, vice president of institutional advancement at Louisiana College, said his school is re-evaluating whether to delay the opening date of its new law school by one year.

"The only challenge we've had is the economy," he said. "When things level off and begin to go back up, it'll make things easier. But it's

been the biggest hurdle."

Officials at the private Southern Baptist institution will re-evaluate their law school's 2010 opening date unless they raise at least \$7 million during the next six to eight weeks, Mr. Johnson said. If that initial goal is met, the college could begin recruiting a founding dean, administrators and faculty members. Much depends on whether donors meet their commitments.

"A lot of them are waiting and seeing what the economy is doing," said Mr. Johnson.

Still Optimistic

Concordia University in Portland, Ore., had hoped to open the Concordia University School of Law in Boise, Idaho, as soon as next year. Now those plans have been put off for one year, said Andrea Bruno, Concordia's vice president for advancement.

She cited delays in developing a curriculum and acquiring property, but conceded that slow fundraising was a factor.

"We're not immune to what's happening out there," Ms. Bruno said. "Like everyone else, fundraising is more challenging. But we're optimistic."

The new Lincoln Memorial University Duncan School of Law will stick to its planned August opening date, said university spokeswoman Kate Reagan, but will delay its first major fundraising drive. That drive was to have begun last month, when administrators announced that the law school would be named after U.S. Representative John J. Duncan Jr., R-Tenn.

The main campus is located in Harrogate, Tenn., and the law school is being developed in Knoxville. Most of the money involved thus far came from institutional funds and tuition, Ms. Reagan said. The fundraiser would help pay for renovations to Knoxville's Old City Hall, which will house the law school, and for programs.

"We had some other schedul-

ing issues, but the economy did play a role in that decision, and we've held it off," she said. "At this point, we're looking at possibly waiting until after students are enrolled and the semester gets under way."

The program has received accreditation and hired a founding dean, Sydney A. Beckman, an associate dean for library sciences and faculty members for an inaugural class of 75 students, who will attend at night and on weekends. A full-time program will begin in fall 2010.

For some institutions, the dire economic situation has left ambitious plans in doubt.

The University of New Haven in Connecticut estimated one year ago that its new law school would require at least \$22 million in initial investments. The university is still looking for a single large benefactor.

"To the extent that current economic conditions restrict fundraising, any progress toward developing a law school will be restricted to an equal degree," university spokeswoman Julie Winkel said in an e-mail.

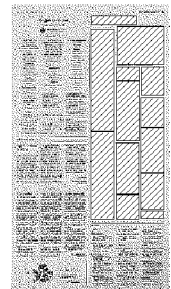
State Financial Woes

In addition to the two SUNY schools, several other planned public law schools have suffered from state budget cuts.

Plans at the University of Idaho College of Law to begin offering a third-year program at its satellite campus in Boise in fall 2010 have been significantly hindered by the Idaho Legislature's recent decision not to allocate \$900,000. The money would have paid for faculty and library facilities, said Dean Don Burnett at the main campus in Moscow, Idaho.

Administrators intend to resubmit their funding request during the next legislative session, which begins in January 2010. Meanwhile, existing resources, such as student tuition and fundraising, might be enough to support a new faculty member who could help start the third-year program as early as 2010 with a fledgling class of 25 or 30 students, Mr. Burnett said.

"It is a challenge. Things have



slowed down broadly, with regard to fundraising, although the University of Idaho has not slowed down much," he said. "But we do know that private fundraising is going to be a challenge over the next year or two."

In Texas, state legislators are expected to approve a new law school within the University of North Texas system; it would be the first public law school in the Dallas-Fort Worth region. However, the Texas Legislature failed to pass tuition revenue bonds that would have paid for renovations for a permanent building in Dallas, said Cynthia Hall, director of system and external relations at the university system.

"It has a huge effect on the school because it'll slow us down into getting into a permanent building," Ms. Hall said of the financial situation. Without its permanent building, the law school, due to open in fall 2011, will be unable to offer evening classes because it shares space with several other universities in its temporary location.

Relatively Unscathed

Two law schools remain relatively uninhibited by economic conditions: Husson University in Bangor, Maine, which still plans to launch an evening law school next year; and the University of California, Irvine School of Law, which will open its doors in the fall.

Irvine has raised more than \$28 million for student scholarships and faculty endowments, most recently a \$2 million grant from an anonymous donor for an environmental law clinic.

Charles Cannon, assistant dean

of development and external affairs for the law school, which will accept 65 students in the fall, said that the school benefited from timing.

"If we'd been a year later, who knows?" he said. "Because so many things were in place when they were, we're sailing ahead."

Still, Mr. Cannon said, the economic downturn has noticeably affected gifts from law firms. As a result, school officials are focusing on local partners, rather than the firms themselves, and asking for donations of \$35,000 and \$50,000, rather than \$100,000. Other donations are coming in from executives at companies interested in technology and intellectual property, and from foundations and businesses in countries such as South Korea and Spain, he said.

Husson University has hired a founding dean, Michael Mullane,

and two faculty members for its planned law school and plans to apply to the state education authorities and the Maine Supreme Judicial Court for accreditation in the near future.

The school targets local residents interested in attending school in the evenings and weekends, said Julie Green, a Husson spokeswoman.

If approved, the law school could open with an incoming class of 25, she said. Already in place are the computers, library and facilities for the school, which is being financed primarily through university funds and tuition.

"There's nothing about the economy that's changed our plans," she said.

Amber Bronstad is a reporter at The National Law Journal, an affiliate of the New York Law Journal. She can be reached at Amanda.Bronstad@inclsivemedia.com

