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## New Convocation Center Planned at Virginia State

### Project could be a sign of school's Division I hopes

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Virginia State University plans to build a \$70 million, 7,500-seat on-campus convocation center that it hopes will expand its money-making potential and change the landscape of its athletics program.

The project, which is not expected to start for three or four years, will enable Virginia State to bid for state high school basketball tournaments; NCAA and conference postseason tournaments; and high school graduation ceremonies.

The Virginia General Assembly approved legislation in April that authorizes nearly \$1.5 billion in bond financing for building projects at state colleges and facilities during the next two years.

Virginia State will receive \$44 million. The Chesterfield County School Board voted June 24 to provide \$175,000, giving the school system the option of switching its graduation ceremonies to the new VSU venue.

"There's no question we will compete with VCU and the Siegel Center for events," said Tom Reed, VSU's director of university relations. "We will try to attract regional tournaments and state tournaments as an economic driver.

"We expect to develop significant parking, which means we won't have some of the [parking] issues that downtown has right now. We plan on using this to raise our profile, so we will actively pursue those opportunities."

Virginia State is negotiating the purchase of adjacent properties to build the convocation center near Daniel Gym.

The university, which held its graduations at the Richmond Coliseum the past two years, expects to provide \$19 million toward the projected cost. That equates to an annual debt service of \$1.4 million, according to an October 2006 feasibility report conducted by Washington-based Brailsford & Dunlavy.

In addition, university officials hope to generate \$10 million by exploring partnerships with the county and surrounding cities, including Petersburg, Colonial Heights and Hopewell.

Virginia State expects to offset part of the cost by staging 105 to 132 events a year -- including concerts, boat shows, trade shows, conventions and religious events -- that could raise nearly \$500,000 annually during the first five years after its completion.