Eliot Cutler touts graduate center progress, UMA eyes name change

By Nick McCrea, BDN Staff
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BANGOR, Maine — The former gubernatorial candidate leading the University of Maine System’s push to start a joint graduate business and law center told the system’s board on Sunday that he’s already sitting down with deans and faculty to figure out what programs the center might offer.

“This is an opportunity to innovate and excel, and I’m confident that we can do both,” Eliot Cutler told UMS trustees Sunday, during the first day of its two-day regular meeting. “I don’t yet have all the answers.”

The center, which would be located at the University of Southern Maine, would bring graduate business programs from the University of Maine and USM under the same roof as the UMaine School of Law. The theory is that they could create more attractive programs and better meet the
needs of area businesses and law firms as a unified center.

Cutler, a lawyer and former candidate for Maine governor, was hired by the system in April to work with a steering committee to create a plan for the center. His $195,000 salary is being paid by the Harold Alfond Foundation, which gave the system $1.25 million to fund “early leadership and program development efforts” for the center.

“We have 15 months to come up with the blueprint for a center that will attract your endorsement” as well of the support of the local business and legal communities, Cutler told the trustees.

The initiative has four main goals, he said:
— To be academically distinct and more competitive among regional alternatives.
— To create a curriculum that attracts students from across the region and meets employer needs.
— To have a large enough space to collaborate and bring in community partners.
— To have enough funding to create a center that will be financially sound.

“We need to demonstrate the value of the notions that lie behind this center,” Cutler said. He stressed the importance of building a “strong foundation of public support.”

Also at Sunday’s meeting, University of Maine at Augusta officials laid out their plan for the institution’s next five years. President Glenn Cummings said this would involve a strengthened focus on distance education and improved graduate program offerings.

Cummings said the school’s location in Maine’s capital could help foster connections with state employees and provide them with opportunities pursue further education, including graduate degrees.

Cummings said the institution is also looking to change its name to the Maine State University. The rebranding effort aims to make it clearer that UMA’s satellite locations are under the same umbrella, and remove some of the confusion that has resulted from having a University of Maine at Augusta campus in Bangor.

Trustees will vote on UMA’s five-year plan Monday, but the discussion about the new name will be sidelined for future discussion. An explanation of the full plan is available in the meeting materials on the University of Maine System’s website.

The trustees also recognized outgoing USM President David Flanagan, who retires at the end of June after a tumultuous tenure. Flanagan, who served 12 years as a trustee from the mid-1980s to mid-’90s, was hired to lead USM in July 2014.

“The job you gave me was triage,” Flanagan told the trustees. “We were in financial freefall, and my job was to stop that and reverse it. I think we’ve done that.”

In 2014, USM eliminated 51 faculty positions and five academic programs to close a $16 million budget shortfall. The cuts drew the ire of some faculty and students, but the university presented a balanced budget for 2016, he said.

Flanagan said it was “maybe the most difficult job I’ve had in my life.”

Trustees also presented a resolution thanking J.Kelley Wiltbank, general counsel for the system since 1998, for his years of service. Wiltbank retires June 30.
On Monday, the second day of the regular meeting, trustees will vote on the $519 million fiscal year 2016 budget and a review of ongoing efforts to restructure system finances and administration under Chancellor James Page’s One University initiative.

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