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Board wants ODU playing football by 2009

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Holding a customized Old Dominion University football, Vice President for Development and Alumni Relations Alonzo C. Brandon answers questions about plans to start a football program during a Board of Visitors meeting on Tuesday. YOON S. BYUN / the virginian-pilot.



ODU President Runte

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NORFOLK — The temperature at Old Dominion University reached the mid-90s Tuesday afternoon – perfect weather, it turned out, for football.

By a vote of 14-0, the university's Board of Visitors approved resurrecting a football program that has been dormant at the school for 65 years. If certain preliminary criteria are met, ODU would hire a coach in 2007 and play its first game since 1940 at Foreman Field in fall 2009.

President Roseann Runte, administrators and student and alumni representatives voiced strong consensus that football would increase school spirit, shed ODU's image as a commuter school, draw alumni back to campus and inspire more donations.

"Alumni will finally have that homecoming long denied them," said Lauren Connor, president-elect of the Alumni Association, who pledged that her organization will sell season tickets, solicit donations and promote the program.

"The Alumni Board and the Alumni Association are poised to support this. Just give us a chance."

The plan is contingent on three prerequisites recommended by Runte and approved by the board:

n That a consultant be hired to corroborate the administration's assessment that there is sufficient support in Hampton Roads to start football. The report will be filed by the December Board of Visitors meeting.

n That ODU have commitments from the city by December for land needed to support the plan. The school would like to use the stadium being built by the city on Powhatan Avenue for football practice, and it needs space for women's crew, softball and volleyball facilities. Those three sports are being added to keep ODU in compliance with Title IX .

Norfolk Mayor Paul D. Fraim said he has discussed a football practice facility and softball field with Runte and said he "was reasonably confident" that a suitable site could be located.

"We will work closely with Old Dominion," said Fraim, who played football at Virginia Military Institute and lives about a mile from ODU's campus.

n That ODU gather by June 2006 pledges totaling \$8 million for an endowment that would help finance the team.

"A test of community support," Runte called it.

She and her top administrators said they were confident all three provisos would be met.

"Everybody we've talked to has been in favor of it for the most part," said Alonzo Brandon, vice president for Development and Alumni Relations, who held a football with a bright blue ODU logo as he spoke.

"We have a huge untapped market out there. We talk to people all the time who don't give, and they say it's because they don't feel connected to the university. When we ask what we need to do to make them feel connected, they say, 'Start football.'"

Runte distributed to board members a one-page chart outlining the estimated costs of starting football, plus women's crew in 2007, softball in 2009 and volleyball in 2015. The annual total expense for all four sports would grow from \$1.3 million in 2007-08 to \$9.9 million in 2014-15.

The capital costs to start up the four sports – including outfitting Foreman Field with nine luxury suites, building locker rooms and other amenities – would be \$27 million, said Robert L. Fenning, vice president for Administration and Finance.

ODU officials said they planned conservatively, deliberately maximizing projections for expenses and minimizing expected revenue. For instance, Fenning said, they estimated paid attendance of 6,000 at each home game, with tickets costing \$20 each.

The major funding source for the plan, which would get no state money, is through increases in student fees.

Over three years, beginning in the fall of 2006, ODU would phase in a \$7-per-credit hour charge dedicated to football and the new women's sports. For a full-time student taking 15 hours of classes per semester, that would amount to \$210 a year.

Students taking 15 hours a semester will pay \$1,890 for all student activities in the coming school year, Fenning said.

The university, he said, will follow standard financial practices with the football endowment, tapping no more than 4.5 percent of the total amount every year.

ODU will also raise about \$1.7 million a year from an annual fund, naming rights, sponsorships, advertising and premium seating, according to the plan. Brandon said Foreman Field's name has strong recognition in the area, but ODU would consider significant donations to modify it.

ODU would eventually distribute 63 football scholarships and will compete at the I-AA level within the Colonial Athletic Association, its current conference. When the CAA begins playing football in 2007, it is expected to be the premier I-AA football league in the country. Four CAA teams – defending national champion James Madison, 2003 champion Delaware, New Hampshire and The College of William and Mary – were among 16 that advanced to the national playoffs last season.

Beginning in 2007, the other football-playing members of the CAA will be Richmond, Maine, Towson State, Villanova, Hofstra, Massachusetts, Northeastern and Rhode Island.

In addition to the creation of the new women's programs, ODU will comply with federal gender-equity guidelines by pouring additional funding into current women's sports. The university has no plans to cut any men's sport, something several board members were concerned about.

"We want to do it well and without trading off the programs we have now," said athletic director Jim Jarrett. "That's critical."

The football plan drew enthusiastic support from board members. Only one, retired Adm. Harold W. Gehman Jr. of Virginia Beach, voiced hesitation.

Gehman suggested that the board wait for the consultant's report before taking a vote and said the numbers provided to the board did not contain enough specifics.

"I'd be reluctant to vote for football when we haven't gotten the first figures yet," Gehman said.

But his concerns were virtually drowned out by football supporters. "I think the numbers are here," said Virginia Beach lawyer Moody E. "Sonny" Stallings Jr. "I thought the consultant's job was to say, 'Your numbers are good, and the community will support us.'"

Delaying a vote, said Stallings and William E. Russell, the deputy superintendent of Chesapeake schools, would hamper

fund raising efforts and make ODU appear halfhearted in its desire for football. "We've stepped up to the plate before and struck out," Stallings said.

ODU unsuccessfully sought to resurrect football in the late '80s. Two fund raising and season-ticket campaigns fell short of their goals, and the board abandoned the idea.

Runte said ODU would fare better now because it has more students – its enrollment of 21,000 is projected to grow to 27,000 within six years – it is presenting a united front in support of football, and the Hampton Roads area has shown an increased appetite for sports.

Runte acknowledged that some college football programs have been plagued by academic and ethical controversies. But she vowed that ODU will be committed to the same academic standards for football players as it has been for other students.

A marching band and expanded cheerleading squad will be added so that the university could, as Runte explained, "provide all of the things that make football a special opportunity." The start up costs of those programs have been factored into the plan.

Finally, officials said, they will work with city officials to have certain areas near Foreman Field designated for tailgating.

"This is not the Old Dominion it once was," Runte said. "The times have changed and our way of doing things has changed."

Staff writer Harry Minium contributed to this report.

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