

Headline: Cortana site could host college
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Media Contact: CALDER, CHAD
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Virginia College, of Birmingham, Ala., is eyeing an anchor tenant location at Cortana Mall in the former Steve & Barry's store.

Don Keith, senior vice president of marketing communications for Virginia College parent Education Corporation of America, said the deal is contingent on regulatory approval by the state and the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools.

Also, the city-parish still has to approve the building permit before a lease is signed with the mall. He said Virginia College hopes to begin converting the 63,000-square-foot former apparel store when those hurdles are cleared.

Virginia College generally invests between \$4 million and \$6 million in its locations, and should have as many as 1,500 students at any given time after its been operating a couple of years, Keith said.

Keith said Virginia College, which is in 14 locations in the Southeast, focuses on preparing graduates for employment sectors that are expanding.

Those now primarily are personal care, which includes cosmetology; health care; and business, particularly medical billing, coding and reimbursement.

We specialize in preparing people for direct entry into the job market where we anticipate where the job growth is going to be, he said.

Cortana Mall spokeswoman Rebecca Rainer said the mall does not comment on pending agreements.

Dottie Tarleton, a Stirling Properties broker specializing in retail who is familiar with the area, said Virginia College locating at the mall is indicative of a national trend.

She said she's been contacted by a couple of schools looking to take over empty stores in Baton Rouge.

They're taking big-box spaces, not just here, but all over the country, she said.

Tarleton said the arrival of an unconventional tenant isn't that surprising given the current retail climate.

National retailers, with only a few exceptions, have been pulling back in recent years as consumer spending has cooled off. A number of big-box chains Circuit City, CompUSA Linens N Things have had financial trouble and closed stores, leaving empty buildings here that rivals aren't in a hurry to fill.

Across town, at an outparcel of the Mall of Louisiana, the former CompUSA building has been empty for a couple of years, becoming home to temporary tenants including a Halloween costume store and a local megachurch.

Tarleton said Baton Rouge is actually a little over-saturated with retail. Cortana is simply reacting to the reality of the market and may be in the process of reinventing itself, similar to what nearby Bon Marche now a business and technology park had to do.

It's going to become what it needs to be, and that's great, she said. I'm sure the folks at the mall are thrilled. How many students are going to be coming there every day, and then going into the mall to

shop? Its really good for them.

Keith said Virginia College has been around for 30 years, and the curriculum tends to shift depending on where the jobs are.

We always react to the job market, he said. We dont have programs in areas where job growth is contracting.

Virginia College currently has 14,000 students, including those taking courses online, but is looking at expanding in other locations.

It has schools in Austin, Texas; Jackson and Biloxi, Miss.; Mobile, Ala.; Chattanooga, Tenn.; Jacksonville, Fla.; and Greenville, S.C., among other cities.

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