



College of Staten Island ready to boost community presence

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With the school's mascot looking on, the College of Staten Island's interim president William J. Fritz and A. Ramona Brown, vice president of student affairs, present a gift certificate to freshman Dakota Dawkins, who won a campus-wide contest to name the new dormitory complex, dubbing it "Dolphin Cove."

Staten Island Advance/Sri Walpola

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- A center of learning, the College of Staten Island (CSI) is on the verge of playing a key role in holding widespread, impactful discussion in hopes of preparing the borough for the future post-Hurricane Sandy.

Led by Dr. William Fritz, the college's interim president and renowned geologist, the Willowbrook campus will host the Superstorm Sandy Forum: A Serious Conversation about the Future of Staten Island on Friday, March 8.

The event will involve elected officials from all levels, business leaders, scientists and educators to discuss topics ranging from how hurricanes occur, and why New York, especially Staten Island, is so vulnerable, as well as steps folks can take to protect themselves from the storms, zoning issues, and more.

"I've been billing it as what we need: A serious conversation," said Fritz, who has already attended two separate conferences regarding hurricanes in New York.

PROBLEM SOLVING

CSI's head said colleges are a great venue for getting people together in conversation, and his intention is to bring people who can "make things happen" to one place to discuss ideas to help Staten Island be in a better position the next time a major storm strikes the borough, be it this year or in 30 years.

For the past several months, Fritz and Engineering Science and Physics Professor Dr. Alan Benimoff, Vice President for Technology Systems Dr. Michael E. Kress and other colleagues have employed the school's Interdisciplinary High-Performance Computing Center to model the effects of a storm surge, be it 14 feet or higher.

Dr. Benimoff has pieced together up-to-date maps detailing Staten Island's Zone A location, the level of damage each property suffered, and how the water flowed through the borough.

As previously reported by the Advance, Fritz has modeled a five-point plan to protect the borough from future severe weather.

The plan includes protecting the barrier islands, dunefields and marshes that remain on Staten Island so they can

absorb water and prevent further damage; rebuilding coastal dunefields damaged by the storm; re-zoning, which Fritz said could involve turning locations once inhabited to recreational sites that could in turn also prevent damage; engineering solutions, such as sea walls, and, most importantly, education.

EDUCATION ESSENTIAL

Fritz, who vacations in coastal Oregon towns, said signage is present at various locations showing a person fleeing a wave by seeking higher elevation.

"It's a pictorial image, and you realize 'Storm surge. Climb.' Some people went into their basements [during Sandy], which is the worst possible thing they could do," he said.

Fritz also recommended pamphlets that provide evacuation details.

Unlike New Orleans or other coastal towns, Staten Island has multiple elevations that could serve as safe havens for people anticipating hurricane damage to their homes.

"Staten Island has the highest point on the Eastern seaboard. We have lots of places to go here," he said, adding some locations are just two or three blocks — running distances, not car distances — from properties in low elevations.

CSI's interim president explained his role as head of the school has somewhat expanded due to the storm.

"Since I've taken over as president, I want the college to be part of Staten Island, not apart from Staten Island. I want to make sure we're helping," he said.

Following the storm, volunteers affiliated with CSI pledged thousands of hours to folks in need. Others assisted people, including students, with mental counseling. CSI also used numerous funds to financially support students and staff impacted by Sandy.

"I feel really good about the college's response, but that was a short-term response. I'm worried about the long-term response," he said.

CHANGES COMING

CSI's upcoming student residences are just several months from being open this fall, said Fritz.

"Those are going to transform the life of the campus," he said. "They're really state-of-the-art facilities."

He anticipates the residence hall to be among the best student housing in the nation.

"Students that live in residence halls are more successful than ones who don't. They get their degrees quicker, have better GPAs. When you're connected to the campus, you're focused on the life of the campus," Fritz said.

“Every student from CSI, whether they live in the halls or not, will benefit from it.”

2M, a 100,000-square-foot building near the Sports and Recreation Center (1R), will be the site of a future renovation that will result in 10 new classrooms and two office suites.

“That will give us the power to continue to renovate that whole building,” he said.

He also said the school is less than two years away from breaking ground on a 175,000-square-foot computer center in the middle of the campus. It will have multi-functional laboratories, lecture halls and office spaces connected to CSI’s advanced interdisciplinary computer system.

Fritz also mentioned CSI will be home to three new schools: School of business, health sciences and human services, and education, and deans are in the process of being hired. In addition, CSI is adding a master of social work program and recently installed a master of science in accounting.

“I think we offer high quality education,” said the school’s interim president. “We’ve been the best kept secret on Staten Island and in higher education. I’m hoping people will only be able to say that for the next few years.”

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