Board of Trustees Remarks, delivered at the GVSC Foundation Meeting on November 8, 1983

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GRAND VALLEY STATE COLLEGE FOUNDATION MEETING - BOARD OF TRUSTEES

November 8, 1983

When we asked you to serve on the Board of the Grand Valley College Foundation, we told you about three responsibilities we wanted you to assume as trustees. First we agreed to submit for your review and recommendation all fund-raising campaigns conducted by Grand Valley. Glenn Walters will report on the drive for funds for the engineering science program that was approved last year. Second, we described as the central purpose of the Foundation the building of the endowment fund. Paul, Rich, and Joyce have covered our progress and plans toward that goal last year and this. The third responsibility that we have always mentioned without much elaboration is the construction of a downtown Grand Rapids Center. The time has come for elaboration.

Through the particularly careful and accurate coverage of the Grand Rapids Press on the development of the west bank of the Grand River, you have learned that Grand Valley has been buying, over the past four years, parcels of land totalling a little over four acres. That and other land contiguous to it reaching from Fulton to Pearl Streets is the base for an exciting plan to develop the west bank combining public and private uses for the property.

A few weeks ago I visited with both fine candidates for mayor of Grand Rapids about the subject of our downtown center. Both conversations went something like this:

"You may have a good idea, but there is a lot of convincing to do. Why does Grand Valley want to come downtown anyway?" That gave me the opportunity to explain that we have been downtown for
years. Grand Rapids Junior College has provided classrooms when they could. We have also used the Grand Center, but our enrollments are going beyond the capacity to find adequate classrooms. Last year there were nearly 4,000 Grand Valley class registrations in the city. Besides, we need a permanent place where mini-computers can be installed. There are few subjects that don't require some computer use in the teaching process. As more people in the city require retraining and new training, especially in the technologies, more permanent laboratory type space is necessary to serve them and their businesses and industries. We estimate our immediate need is for 45 classrooms and that doesn't contemplate other uses for a downtown center.

"What other uses do you anticipate?" they asked. We are in the process of establishing a Center for Economic Expansion and Job Development to pull together in one place in this area all research, consultant, and service capabilities needed by that business, particularly small business and those businesses that seek redirection. The building downtown will be the home for that center. A new cooperative program with Ferris State in engineering science and manufacturing technology will be there also. On our Allendale campus WGVC-TV and our main-frame computer live together in the same building none too happily anymore because both have expanded in the last few years. If possible, we would like to move the TV station downtown and give the building to the computer department. With more local programming in the future, a downtown home for Channel 35 seems appropriate.
"Speaking about the Allendale campus, what's to become of it? I hear about campuses being overbuilt." There seems to be some mistaken idea that a few students ramble about in nearly empty facilities. That just is not the case. This year we turned down 200 more applicants than we did the previous year. Our student housing was filled by July and many qualified students did not enroll because suitable housing near campus was also filled. In a dynamic area like ours in west Michigan, we think we will continue to keep the Allendale campus fulfilling its mission while seeing the education and retraining of older adults expanding in centers in Grand Rapids and along the lakeshore. This year our headcount increased 5.6%, the credit hours students registered for went up 13%, and after graduating a large senior class we were pleased to see new student enrollment increase 17%.

"All right," he said, "if Allendale is going well, and you don't have adequate facilities downtown for the job you are presently doing, why not buy and remodel an old building?"

"Glad you asked," I replied. That is exactly what we tried to do. We looked at several. Either the price or the location wasn't right. In all cases fire marshal requirements for classrooms made estimated remodelling costs when added to the purchase price so high we thought it best to build a new structure. In all the possibilities we examined, parking was inadequate.

"So you settled on a location on the river. Why should you have such valuable land to remove from the tax rolls? We need more tax base, not less, in the city." Our location was decided primarily by the fact that Fred Hubbard wasn't having any buyers
for his warehouse on Front Street. We agreed to buy it from Elston Richards for $250,000, and Fred gave us another building on Wealthy near Eastern which we sold for $223,000. No one was much interested in the property where we are until after we began buying it. Besides, as Dick Gillett has always pointed out, don't forget the multiplier effect. We can be of help to the proposed new hotel and the hotel to us. Grand Valley will have between 50 and 100 conferences a year that will use the hotel facilities on both sides of the river. In addition to providing the advanced training that a strong economy must have, the traffic our center will generate for downtown business will be more valuable in its support of tax-paying enterprises than the tax value of the land we occupy.

"I'll buy that, but J.C. was here first. We don't want wasteful duplication in education even if you do produce revenues downtown."

Of course not, that is why we have a written agreement with J.C., approved by their Board and ours, that we will not offer any freshman and sophomore courses in Grand Rapids or the school districts contiguous to Grand Rapids. They are the junior college and we are building the junior and senior courses and masters degree programs, taking into account the curriculum at J.C. For several years many of their professors and ours have worked together to connect the programs of the two institutions so a resident of this area can move from Grand Rapids J.C. to Grand Valley without difficulty.

"I'd heard something about that, but it wasn't clear in my mind. That kind of cooperation is essential. All you have said
has merit. I believe we should do more to get behind Grand Valley as our local area state college, but can the state spend the 15 million dollars to build the center?"

Now you have touched a sensitive spot with me. Sometimes those of us who administer state institutions are accused of fighting for dollars for the dollars' sake, or the fighting sake alone. For myself, I will not accept that criticism. I believe strongly that the economy and culture of this area depend in part on good and comprehensive education. Many people will need to be educated where they live and we are in the second most populated region in Michigan. Private resources and institutions cannot do the job alone; neither can the state and its institutions. A partnership between private and state resources is the answer, and we should make sure that we receive our share (not more than our share) of our tax dollars to do the job.

Some people here are naive. For the most part they are conservative. So am I. They believe that tax dollars not spent here are not spent. Not so! If you are a conservative, you advocate a smaller tax pie; if you are liberal by today's definition, you want the tax pie to be larger. In both cases there is a pie, whether large, small, or in between. My concern is that once the pie is baked we in west Michigan and at Grand Valley have our share of nourishment from it. Even in difficult times a 15 million dollar investment over three years in Grand Rapids is not very large when you consider the state spends 10 billion dollars a year. If
that 15 million doesn't find its way here to contribute to the economic development, it will wind up somewhere else.

"Oh! You mean let's build a college in Grand Rapids with some of our tax money, instead of Detroit."

That's right. Detroit needs good education, too, but they are rather adept at cutting pie.

"Well, I enjoyed having breakfast with you. I'm glad we got together."

"I am too. Thanks for taking time from the campaign to talk with me."

"To me, it seems we are both working toward the same goal. Let's keep the momentum in Grand Rapids and western Michigan going. Good bye. Thanks again."

We are moving closer to the moment of truth. Nothing like the west bank development and Grand Valley's center come to fruition without controversy, explanation, and coordinated support. Attached to two recent consumer surveys done by Kennedy Associates were questions about our center. I was pleased that we received a 65% approval on the first and 69% on the second. The public has not been exposed enough to the project to consider those percentages fixed, but they are encouraging. There is enough generally favorable support for us to build on. We need now the commitment of the leadership of this community to make a reality of our plan.

In the coming year we will ask members of our Foundation Board to meet with state officials and legislators to advocate our project, to participate in meetings with citizens of this area to help explain what we want to do and why, and perhaps if a little
more money is required, to prime the state pump to give in addition to the $1,200,000 already contributed or pledged to the purchase of the site. We have always been most successful when we approached the state with a share of the dollars in hand.

Together private enterprise, the city, the downtown development authority, the state, and even the federal government can form a partnership to make the west bank bloom like one gigantic rose.