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Campell Soup Expanding In Camden

(AP) CAMDEN, N.J. The Campbell Soup Co., which kept its headquarters Camden even after institutions such as the daily newspaper and the Catholic high school moved to the suburbs decades ago, has announced an expansion plan designed to keep the company in place for the foreseeable future.

The new Campbell facilities are to be the centerpiece of a 110-acre office park in an underutilized corner of the city just east of downtown. Campbell hopes to break ground on the \$72 million project this summer and complete construction in the fall of 2008.

Campbell would be the developer for the area, hoping to use its clout to lure other big companies. The city, county and state governments would kick in a combined \$26 million to rework the roads and upgrade other infrastructure in the area.

If it comes to fruition, the development would become a prime example of success for a bold plan to revitalize Camden by spending public money to attract private investment.

"They are fulfilling the destiny this organization has in this city," Gov. Jon S. Corzine said at a news conference at Campbell headquarters, where the plans were unveiled Wednesday.

Campbell President and CEO Douglas R. Conant said the company had

been considering sites elsewhere in the Philadelphia area for its headquarters and had been prepared to move, but had not been close to a deal. "We don't want to move," he said. "We're physically anchored here -- and emotionally."

Besides its famous soups, the company's brands include Pepperidge Farm cookies and crackers, Prego pasta sauces, Godiva chocolates and other foods. Campbell was founded in Camden in 1869 and had manufacturing plants in the city until 1989.

The new building the company is planning would be sort of a student union for the corporate campus, offering a cafe, company store, credit union, fitness center and conference rooms.

The other main buildings -- with office space and test kitchens, among other functions -- would remain much the same as they are now.

Leaving Camden would have created a huge void. The company has 1,200 employees and pays about \$1.3 million each year in property taxes -- about 8 percent of what the cash-strapped city collects each year. Through its foundation, Campbell also donates about \$1 million per year to organizations in Camden.

Its decision to stay in the city means those benefits remain. And the company expects its property tax bill to increase to about \$2 million annually.

For the city's finances, the 70 acres of the office park not used by Campbell could be a bigger boon.

But the tenants, look, cost and impact of the office park are all unknowns now. Campbell officials said that nearly the only certain

thing about is that while the company would be the developer of the land, it would not be the owner.

Instead, the state Economic Development Authority, or some other public entity, would own the land.

Corzine said the public money involved in the deal -- which still requires various government approvals -- would not benefit only Campbell, but also any other firms that move to the office park.

And Conant said that Campbell would not make money by acting as developer for the rest of the property.

In Camden, big redevelopment plans are announced more often than completed -- so there's often some skepticism about them.

But the Campbell plan was quickly embraced by local officials, as well as leaders of dozens of community organizations who attended Wednesday's announcement.

"Hopefully, it will inspire other corporations to say, 'There is a work pool here, there is land available here,'" and to consider setting up offices in the city, said the Rev. Willie Anderson, chairman of Camden Churches Organized for People.

Unlike some plans, the one from Campbell does not call for knocking down any homes.

It may, however, involve razing a long-vacant former Sears store that is on the state's list of historic places. And already, Mark Willis, a former owner of the building, is vowing a legal fight to save it.

Campbell shares closed at \$38.97, up 1 cent, in trading Wednesday on the New York Stock Exchange.

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