MENOMONIE — UW System officials will vote today on general support for a proposed downtown Eau Claire development, but they are seeking more details before requesting $55 million in state funds to help pay for it.

Regent Jeffrey Bartell, a retired Madison attorney and chairman of the Capital Planning and Budget Committee, described the resolution as a "comfort letter" to Eau Claire showing the UW System's support for the Confluence Project.

"It's a very interesting project," he said during the committee meeting at UW-Stout. "It's very early in the consideration of it."

The panel unanimously endorsed the project Thursday. The full Board of Regents will vote this morning on support for the plan, which is seen as crucial for getting state financial approvals for the $88 million project.

Confluence backers are asking for $30 million in state dollars for an off-campus apartment-style residence hall to house 300 to 375 UW-Eau Claire students and a $25 million contribution for a performing arts center that would host university classes and performances.

Regent John Behling, an Eau Claire attorney, noted that this week's actions do not provide final approval but give the message that "this looks like a great project."

**Financial assurances sought by UW**

As with the city of Eau Claire's letter of support granted last week, the UW System has some conditions it wants satisfied before considering a financial contribution to the project: namely the assurance that the state will pay no more than $25 million for the performing arts center, and a financial model detailing how it will be operated.
"We have to ensure if the state puts $25 million in, that it gets precisely that — $25 million of space out of it," said David Miller, the UW System's associate vice president of capital planning and budget.

VenuWorks, a consultant specializing in performing arts venues, has been hired by Confluence partners and is expected to issue a report in November showing how the proposed center would be governed and funded.

"We have to have a viable and sustainable operation model for this to work for all parties," said Mike Rindo, UW-Eau Claire's assistant chancellor for facilities.

The Confluence Project is proposed by Haymarket Concepts, a partnership of Eau Claire developer Commonweal Development, Eau Claire contractor Market & Johnson and Blugold Real Estate, a subsidiary of the UW-Eau Claire Foundation.

That partnership is seeking $10 million from the city of Eau Claire for site improvements, including a pedestrian bridge over the Eau Claire River, 200-stall underground parking lot and public plaza.

**Historical significance of site**

The city gave its general support — not a guarantee of contributing money — to the project last week, but noted that it had several conditions, including assessing the historical value of several buildings that might be demolished by the Confluence Project, planned for the junction of the Eau Claire and Chippewa rivers.

Regent Ed Manydeeds, an Eau Claire attorney, said any historical meaning of the buildings should be contrasted with the location's significance going back further in history. The confluence of the rivers is a site where different cultures met to trade, exchange ideas and learn from one another, he said, which would continue with the Confluence Project.

"I see this as being a powerful way to honor the history of this spot …," he said. "It's important for us to understand this site, and its meaning in history goes beyond a few buildings."

While the Regents will wait until December to vote on funding the project, today's decision is seen as important to others who have been asked for funding.

If the Regents grant their support today, Eau Claire County Board Chairman Gregg Moore said a couple of committees will reopen discussion of a requested $5 million contribution from the county.
Those two committees would have a joint meeting in mid-November before the full County Board could vote on the funding request in early December.

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