Dirt turned on WKU’s Southern Gateway

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1/7

WKU President Timothy Caboni speaks on Elevate WKU, a transformation of on-campus student housing, during a groundbreaking ceremony for WKU’s Southern Gateway on Tuesday. (JACK DOBBS / Daily News)















Morning sun shined down on Western Kentucky University on Tuesday as a group of WKU personnel and elected officials gathered to turn the dirt on WKU's Southern Gateway, a new residence hall that forms part of a larger effort to transform student housing at the university.

"Breaking ground today is just the beginning of something much bigger than a building," WKU President Timothy Caboni said. "The Southern Gateway launches a new standard for what residential life can and will be at WKU."

Situated on land that previously housed Hugh Poland and Douglas Keen Halls, the new dorm will contain 1,000 beds along with communal areas.

Suite-style dorm bathrooms, a 24-hour study area, new dining options and space for an expansion of WKU's Living Learning Communities will be inside too.

The Southern Gateway comes after a string of issues with several residential buildings on campus. Hilltopper Hall, which opened in the fall of 2018, was demolished after severe issues were found with its construction and Normal and Regents Halls were both closed for the 2025-2026 academic year so repairs could be made to faulty structuring.

After these shake-ups with housing, WKU signed an agreement with real estate company Gilbane that had it take over management of Western's dorms from the Student Life Foundation.

WKU also created a new strategy for housing, known as Elevate WKU. Its aim is to transform all aspects of on-campus housing in a way that better meets the needs and desires of students. The Southern Gateway forms the first part of Elevate WKU.

Caboni said the building and the broader Elevate WKU plan were designed around input gathered from students. Last year, 16% of the student body responded to a campus-wide housing survey about what they wanted to see.

“We know our students want both privacy and a strong sense of community,” Caboni said. ” … Their input helped shape decisions about privacy, community spaces and affordability.”

The Southern Gateway carries a price tag of $350 million, a number that includes demolition of Poland and Keen Halls, repairs to existing dorms and construction of the new building. Students are expected to move into the new dorm in the fall of 2028.

After this, Elevate WKU will turn its focus to replacing the beds in Gilbert, McCormack and Rodes Harlin Halls. This phase carries a rough cost of $150 million.

“We’re talking about an investment of about half a billion dollars,” Caboni said. “That certainly is a commitment to our students, our families and to the future of the university.”