

Billionaire names two finalists for free Mass. campus

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c. 2012 Religion News Service (RNS) After four months of hosting tours, soliciting proposals and fending off controversy, the billionaire owners of a picturesque campus in western Massachusetts have announced two finalists in the competition to receive the property free of charge.

Finalists to receive the 217-acre Northfield, Mass., campus founded by 19th-century evangelist D.L. Moody are the Southern Baptist Convention's North American Mission Board and Grand Canyon University Foundation of Phoenix.

"It's our privilege now to gift this to an organization that will carry on the Moody tradition," said a statement from Steve Green, the Oklahoma businessman who bought the campus with his family in 2009.

"We're confident that both the foundation at Grand Canyon University and the North American Mission Board have the capacity and commitment to do so."

Naming finalists marks the latest stage in a two-year process to give away the Northfield campus formerly owned by Northfield Mount Hermon School. Since buying it, the Greens have poured more than \$5 million into improvements, but their initial plans were dashed in December when the C.S. Lewis Foundation missed a key fundraising deadline to launch a C.S. Lewis College.

Since then, dozens of institutions have been visiting and making proposals that show both an orthodox Christian vision and the financial means to pull it off. One early front-runner, Liberty University, became a target of protests from local residents and alumni of Northfield Mount Hermon School.

Liberty was among several schools not chosen because they weren't interested in receiving the entire campus, according to Jerry Pattengale, a college administrator hired by the Greens to help gift the property.

Finalists now offer radically different visions for the campus.

Grand Canyon University, a for-profit Christian school in Phoenix, proposes to establish a second campus in Northfield. As many as 4,800 undergraduates would live on-site. After three or four years, it would likely become a stand-alone university with both traditional and online students, according to Grand Canyon University CEO Brian Mueller.

"We like to make our online students feel part of the campus," Mueller said, noting that GCU in Phoenix has 7,000 traditional students and 40,000 online students. "This would give us a home base in the Northeast for them to better identify with Grand Canyon University."

The North American Mission Board would use the 43-building campus for training missionaries and church planters, as well as hosting retreats for pastors. The Southern Baptist Convention has been targeting the Northeast for church planting in recent years, but the denomination has lacked supportive infrastructure in the region, according to Aaron Coe, vice president for mobilization at NAMB.

Both finalists are being encouraged to work with a third runner-up, Redemption Christian Academy of Troy, N.Y., to find a presence for the historically black prep school on the property. Northfield residents expressed interest in having Redemption Christian Academy on campus, Pattengale said.

A final decision about who gets the campus is expected within the next month.