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State gives firm date for cyber center completion

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Calvin C. Rhodes, executive director of the Georgia Technology Authority, speaks about the new cyber center during the Augusta Metro Chamber of Commerce Member Economic Luncheon Friday. SPECIAL/RHIAN SWAIN

The state of Georgia has given its state-of-the-art cyber training center a name, a place and all the money needed to get built. On Friday, a state technology officials told Augusta business leaders the facility now has an opening date: July 10, 2018.

Georgia Technology Authority Executive Director Calvin Rhodes said during the Augusta Metro Chamber of Commerce's Member Economic Luncheon that the \$50 million Georgia Cyber Innovation and Training Center will open on that date at Augusta University's Riverfront Campus – no ifs, and or buts.

"Otherwise, a few of us are in big trouble with the governor," Rhodes said. "That facility is going to be ready not only to open as a facility, but the programs that will be within will be ready to serve the citizens of the state."

Gov. Nathan Deal on Feb. 15 signed legislation authorizing funding for the 159,000-square-foot center, a multipurpose AU-operated facility on part of a 17-acre riverfront tract once envisioned as the Georgia Golf Hall of Fame and Augusta Botanical Gardens.

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Groundbreaking set for Georgia Cyber Innovation and Training Center (<http://chronicle.augusta.com/news/2017-05-12/groundbreaking-set-georgia-cyber-innovation-and-training-center>)

Rhodes said a ground-breaking event is likely to occur in May or June. The massive high-tech facility is on the fast-track because it is being overseen by the authority instead of the university.

"Normally what would take state government four, five, six months at best to accomplish has already been accomplished since Feb. 15," Rhodes said.

Authority ownership also enables any facility revenue to be reinvested into the building. About half of the space is planned for private-sector tenants, and Rhodes said he has had "numerous" discussions with companies interested in leasing space. The influx of mostly younger tech professionals to downtown would benefit the urban core, he said.

"Part of the attractiveness of this facility is in bringing younger people with the same interests into an area to create, as we say, 'the vibe,'" Rhodes said.

The center can provide a place for company research-and-development teams to security-test web-enabled products – everything from thermostats to cash registers – before taking them to market.

In addition to providing tools and collaborative space for tech-focused companies, the facility will house more than two-dozen Georgia Bureau of Investigation officers who will work on cyber crimes, collaborate with federal agencies and teach rural law enforcement officers digital crime-solving techniques.

“The state currently does not have a cyber crime unit,” Rhodes said. “We rely a lot on the FBI to help with those issues and, quite often, their threshold on (getting involved) must be much broader than what we would typically look at.”

The facility’s “cyber range” will let information security professionals test their skills in a “fenced off” area, much like a firearms range gives police a place to safely train with defensive weapons.

The center will serve AU and the six other University System of Georgia institutions that focus on cyber, as well as technical colleges within the Technical College System of Georgia, including Augusta Technical College.

Rhodes said the Georgia Cyber Innovation and Training Center also will include a 320-seat auditorium and “a couple of ‘big box’ ” rooms for community events. He said he would expect a 300- to 500-space parking lot is needed to accommodate everyone working and training at the facility.

“Cyberspace is not going to get smaller,” he said. “That footprint there is very likely to grow.”

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