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FEATURED

# COVID-19 delays JMU construction, but ambitious expansion ahead

James Faris | Madison Business Review  
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JMU has rapidly grown in recent years, evidenced by rising enrollment and the completion of 10 major construction projects since 2018. Clockwise from top: construction of the Atlantic Union Bank Center, Dukes Dining, Wilson Hall and D-Hall.

Breeze File Photos

Already **\$12.6 million short** in its educational and general budget, JMU postponed several construction projects during the pandemic. In the meantime, officials are hoping enrollment holds steady so the school can continue to service debts from a slew of projects completed in recent years.

Charles King, senior vice president for administration and finance, said JMU decided this summer to delay a \$49 million renovation of Eagle Hall, a \$25 million renovation to the Convocation Center and a \$3 million renovation to Sentara Park.

Work on Eagle Hall, an eight-story residence hall by Bridgeforth Stadium and Newman Lake that turned 50 this year, would've begun last summer and taken two years, but King said the large number of on-campus room vacancies during the pandemic made renovations less urgent. State funding for much of the project is secured, but the hit JMU took in housing revenue meant not all the funds to pay for the project are available.



On the athletics side, JMU postponed plans to add offices and locker rooms in Godwin Hall to the 38-year-old Convocation Center in summer 2021 that would've been done for the fall of 2022 following the completion of the Atlantic Union Bank Center in November.

There were also plans to build a visiting locker room and a concessions facility at Sentara Park, where JMU men's and women's soccer, lacrosse, and women's cross country and track & field compete, in summer 2021. Currently, visiting teams shuttle to Godwin Hall while JMU uses a trailer to sell concessions. King said the school had private funds in place but still decided to put the projects, which he said will take about a year to complete, on hold.

## Pandemic halts JMU's rapid expansion

Since 2018, JMU unveiled two dining halls, D-Hall and Dukes Dining; two parking decks, Chesapeake Avenue Parking Deck and East Campus Parking Deck; a new residence building, Paul Jennings Hall; the new College of Business building, Hartman Hall; and a new athletic facility, the Atlantic Union Bank Center.

### Hartman Hall is home for CoB. Here's how the deal happened.

In that time, the university also added a parking lot next to Godwin Hall, renovated Wilson Hall, worked with the City of Harrisonburg to create an extension to Grace Street and is now renovating the Justice Studies Hall, formerly called Jackson Hall.

## JMU construction projects completed since 2018

Year:	Facility:	Cost:
2018	D-Hall	\$80.7 million
2018	Chesapeake Avenue Parking Deck	\$13.0 million
2019	Godwin Hall lot renovation	\$1.3 million
2019	Wilson Hall renovation	\$16.0 million
2019	Paul Jennings Hall	\$47.8 million
2019	Grace Street extension	\$2.9 million
2020	Dukes Dining	\$25.1 million
2020	East Campus Parking Deck	\$24.3 million
2020	Hartman Hall	\$99.2 million
2020	Atlantic Union Bank Center	\$86.7 million

Sources: JMU, Charles King, The Breeze

Financing for completed projects was secured years ago, King said, adding that JMU's finances are "very strong," thanks to \$24 million in unallocated cash reserves the university built up over time to help in downturns. JMU has an issuer default rating of 'AA-' as of May 30 according to Fitch Ratings, meaning it has a "very strong capacity for future financial commitments," expected to carry a low default risk and isn't "significantly vulnerable to foreseeable events."

But if COVID-19 doesn't get under control and life doesn't return to normal soon, King expressed some concern about debt service payments JMU must make on completed projects, including Dukes Dining, D-Hall, Paul Jennings Hall and parking decks.

Debt service payments are primarily covered by room and board fees as well as comprehensive fees, while vehicle registration fees go toward debt payments on parking decks, King said in an email. To meet these obligations, JMU needs to keep enrollment steady post-pandemic.



### Investigations | COVID-19 withdrawals cause critical loss of tuition

"No one could have predicted [COVID-19] was going to hit and we were going to have these issues," King said. "We're not unique in this, every university in the country is facing these debt issues because of [COVID-19]."

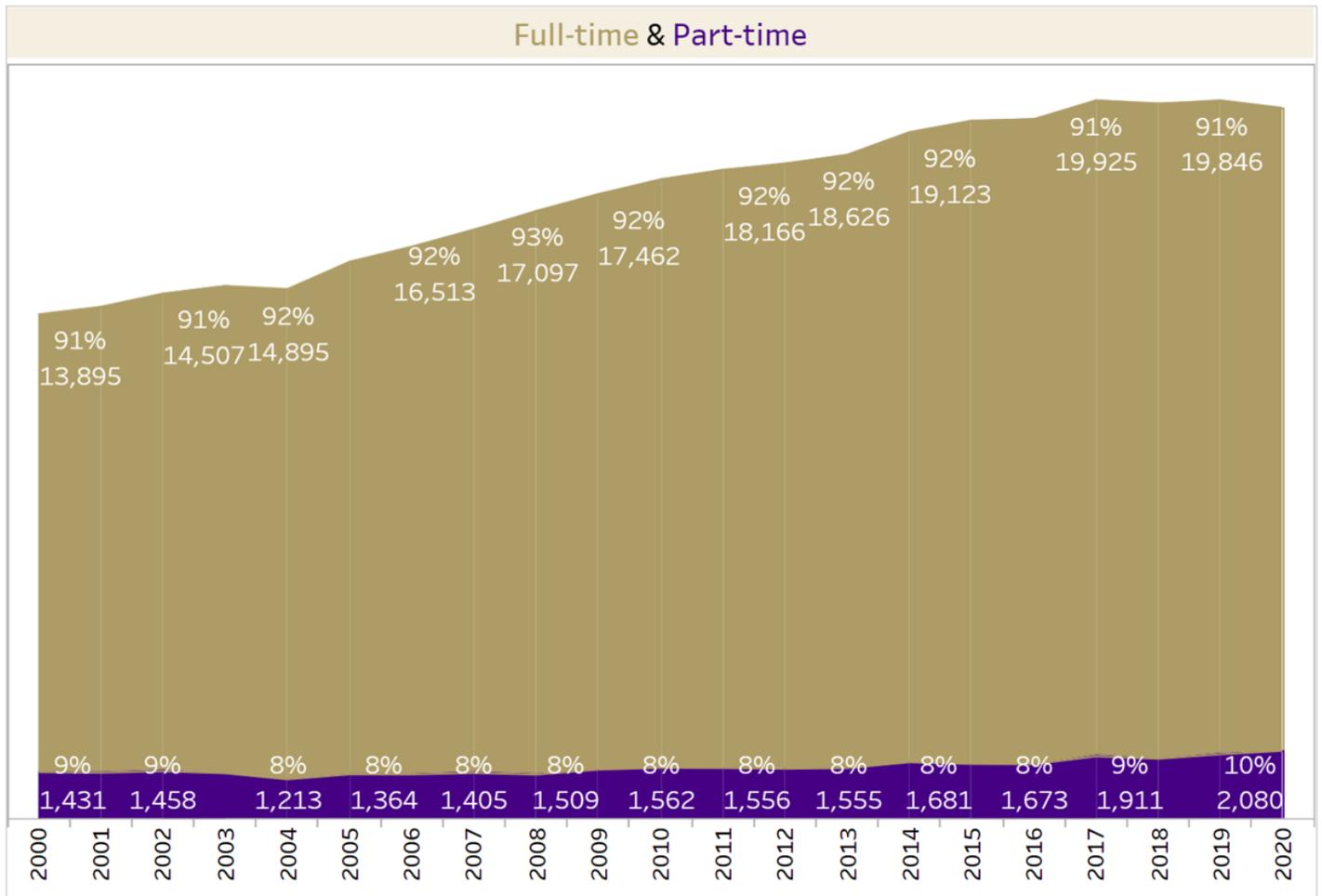


Chart: JMU's Office of Institutional Research

JMU's physical expansion came as the school's **total enrollment** swelled to 21,594 in fall 2020, up 11% from 2010, 27.5% from 2005 and 40.9% from 2000, according to data from JMU's **Office of Institutional Research**. The population surge has since leveled out after peaking in fall 2017, eight months after JMU football won its second FCS title in program history.

Enrollment dipped slightly this fall as undergraduate withdrawals tallied 738 by Sept. 2, but King said he's confident JMU will make it past the pandemic in good financial health.

"As long as there's a vaccine that comes out this spring, and we get enrollment back to normal, we're gonna be fine," King said. "I'm not concerned."

## Carrier expansion, Village revamp still to come

Future construction projects foreshadowed in JMU's 2017 Campus Master Plan Update likely won't be affected by the pandemic, as King said a \$95.7 million renovation and addition to Carrier Library and new Village Area dorms are planned but aren't in focus.

JMU's [six-year capital outlay plan](#) from 2016-22 revealed the university set aside \$85.3 million from its general fund in 2016-18 for Carrier Library's future expansion and an additional \$12.9 million from 2018-20 for furnishings and equipment for the project. The plan also showed that \$60 million in bonds are set aside from 2020-22 for "Village Housing."



JMU is planning an addition to Carrier Library, though it won't be in the next few years.

Image: JMU's 2017 Campus Master Plan Update

Work on Carrier Library, which was originally built in 1940, will be slightly delayed by the pandemic. A [56,200-square-foot addition](#) with more teaching and study spaces is planned, according to JMU's 2017 Campus Master Plan Update.

JMU had hoped to approach the Virginia General Assembly to request funding in January 2022, King said, later confirming in an email that JMU approved \$7 million in university funds from the 2020-22 budget to plan the project, though the pandemic and a lack of funds will delay planning and construction.

Six suite-style, four-story residence halls will bring up to 2,800 beds to replace the nine current Village dorms, which were built between 1966 and 1973. King said the project is likely about a decade down the road.

A Facilities Condition Index Report done by JMU concluded that “all nine of the Village housing buildings are in poor condition and will need to be demolished,” according to JMU’s 2017 Campus Master Plan Update.



JMU eventually plans to replace all nine Village dorms with six modernized residence halls.

Image: JMU’s 2017 Campus Master Plan Update

All generations of alumni, including current students, will likely be in for a shock in future returns to JMU’s campus as the university continues to expand and evolve.

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#### MORE INFORMATION



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## Jack Brown's, Billy Jack's go 'Next Door' as virus spreads

James Faris | Madison Business Review  
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Co-founders, co-owners and childhood best friends Aaron Ludwig (left) and Mike Sabin got creative with seating space to combat the COVID-19 crisis impacting their restaurants.

Courtesy of Aaron Ludwig

Jack Brown's and Billy Jack's got the last of the Laughing Dog.

The two downtown Harrisonburg restaurants have a bit more breathing room in the social distancing era after their owners converted Laughing Dog Studios — a T-shirt shop nestled between the two eateries — into a dining room.

Childhood best friends Aaron Ludwig and Mike Sabin co-founded Jack Brown's Beer and Burger Joint at 80 S Main St. in 2009 and soon started snapping up S Main Street real estate. The business partners opened Billy Jack's Wing & Draft Shack two years later and two doors down at 92 S Main St. and in 2013 bought the building that's home to their restaurants and the former T-shirt studio.



The pandemic dealt a blow to businesses large and small across the country, and while Jack Brown's, Billy Jack's and Laughing Dog studios all felt the blow, the damage to the latter would prove to be fatal. Ludwig said he had a great relationship with his tenants, who'd operated for decades but decided in October to not renew their lease and ease into retirement.

"[COVID-19] was just kind of the final straw for them," Ludwig said. "They gave me a heads up that they were going to be ending their lease and wanting to move out."

The timing couldn't have been better for Ludwig and Sabin, who secured a six-month permit from city officials to open "Next Door" — a 1,400-square-foot space with four tables for Jack Brown's and eight for Billy Jack's — just as the weather started to hinder outdoor seating.



The Next Door space gave Jack Brown's and Billy Jack's a much-needed boost.

Courtesy of Aaron Ludwig

Ludwig said the two had previously brainstormed the move and put it into motion to keep socially distanced and warmer than in the neighboring parking lot, which they'd been leasing since reopening in the spring to put customers at ease and make up for a lack of indoor space. Jack Brown's has just 400 square feet compared to 2,200 for Billy Jack's.

Best of all, the "Covid-friendly" move didn't break the bank, as Ludwig said the co-owners decorated and put in TVs and a stereo system but didn't knock down walls. Guests who check in at Jack Brown's or Billy Jack's must walk outside to be seated at Next Door, as do waiters.



The Next Door space has signs and capacity for both Jack Brown's and Billy Jack's.

Courtesy of Joe Fowler

"Most people are just blown away, just like, 'Oh my God, I was just here not too long ago and there was like a retail store there, like what happened?' Ludwig said. "And this is also a first. Our ABC agent in the sit-in [said] no one in Virginia that they've ever heard of has done seating like this, where you've got two restaurants in one space."

## "It's going to hurt": Nightmarish virus challenges childhood dream

Ludwig and Sabin met 40 years ago in the Friendly City and grew up together, skateboarding while daydreaming about opening a bar one day. The pair eventually went separate ways, as Sabin spent two decades working as a chef in Miami while Ludwig ran a ski and snowboard shop back in Harrisonburg. But their childhood dream eventually came true after Ludwig said a rough day of work got him on the phone to convince Sabin to return home and open a bar.

It took a bank loan and little more than a griddle, frier and draft cooler to open Jack Brown's. The restaurant's name comes from an inside joke of what the long-time friends would call someone whose name they'd forgotten.



Ludwig and Sabin in 2013 bought the building hosting Jack Brown's, Billy Jack's and the former site of Laughing Dog Studios. Courtesy of Joe Fowler

There were no plans for expansion at first, but Billy Jack's was born shortly after and was followed by a dozen other Jack Brown's across the Southeast in Alabama, Florida, North Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia with one in Cincinnati, Ohio, coming soon.

Sales had grown consistently each year at Ludwig and Sabin's restaurants. Then came 2020.

Ludwig said he saw sales slide 60-70% at his restaurants in March and April after closing for about a week. The year-over-year drop narrowed to 20-25% over the summer as the restaurants' carry-out business got going and remained at those levels for much of the fall.

But for the first time in months, Jack Brown's has seen sales pull even to and even top last year's levels by 10% in recent weeks, Ludwig said, thanks to expanded seating with the Next Door space and outdoor patio in an unusually warm fall.

"[Next Door] helped tremendously, especially for Jack Brown's, where a lot of our business is our patio," general manager Justin Harrell said. "That Next Door space gives us the ability for our customers to still come out and enjoy our food and beers. It's all about adapting these days, and that's what we've been trying to do."

By contrast, Billy Jack's hasn't made it back to the black and has been consistently down about 25% since June, general manager Joe Fowler said. While Jack Brown's has more seating than it did a year ago, Billy Jack's has the same number of tables but is missing 30 bar seats, Fowler said, which the restaurant needed to pack in students and let locals grab quick meals.

Fowler still called the Next Door addition a "lifesaver," just like the patio was over the summer. Billy Jack's isn't dependent on JMU football gamedays, Fowler said, though its absence — compounded with the loss of crowds from JMU events like Homecoming and Parents Weekend — has hurt the restaurant.



Courtesy of Joe Fowler



### Life after football: Harrisonburg businesses seek survival

New state-ordered lockdowns prompted by surging COVID-19 case counts also threaten to stall Jack Brown's rebound, just as it started to shrug off the spring and summer sales slump.

Both restaurants had recently extended hours until 2 a.m. but were forced to reverse course after Governor Ralph Northam (D) ordered restaurants to [stop selling alcohol at 10 p.m.](#) starting Nov. 15. That's a crippling blow to Ludwig's businesses, which he said will now close at 10.

"Nobody's going to come to a restaurant after 10 o'clock and just grab food," Fowler said.

Closing earlier will limit losses incurred from staying open and not selling booze, but Ludwig still expects sales to slide back into the red, just as his restaurants were turning the corner.

"When you just think about, like, now we're going to lose another four hours of business and no alcohol, yeah, it's going to hurt," Ludwig said. "I don't see the 10% increase lasting very long while this new mandate is in place."

## "Keep pushing through": Winter survival overshadows post-pandemic plans

Jack Brown's and Billy Jack's are laser-focused on getting through the winter, Fowler said, adding that talks of hiring staff in preparation for a return to normal haven't surfaced yet. He's hopeful the worst of the pandemic will be over by the spring, but he's not banking on it.

"I think we've all learned to not really expect anything at this point," Fowler said. "Just kinda, you know, do what ya gotta do to do our part. I certainly think that's the key: do your part, do what you're asked and, you know, keep pushing through."

Restaurants skate by on thin margins in the best of times, Ludwig said, so pandemic-induced demand shocks have made profitability a pipedream. The restaurant owner said never knowing what's around the corner — be it a lockdown order or COVID-19 outbreak — is most daunting.

"I've always had emergency savings and things like that in case something bad were to happen," Ludwig said. "But you don't ever really think it could be this bad. But overall, you know, as entrepreneurs, we're built to pivot and change and be creative."

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## Starships were meant to fly: Robots take off with JMU Dining

James Faris | Madison Business Review  
Oct 26, 2020



A fleet of 40 Starship food-delivery robots has made over 19,000 deliveries at JMU since August.

Breeze file photo

Even in a bumpy semester for JMU, Starship delivery robots have been on a roll.

Since landing at JMU last semester, Starship Technologies' self-driving robots have grown in popularity as students opt to order on-campus food from the comfort of their dorms.

A fleet of 40 bots has made over 19,000 deliveries since August, Brent Beringer, director for dining at JMU, said via email. That's just under 300 per day, a sign of the robots' popularity that JMU Dining anticipated, Beringer added.



The bots become a convenient necessity for many students, as Beringer said that 78% of purchases are made with Dining Dollars while the rest are made with Flex and credit or debit.

"Students started out using them because they were something so different and odd, and now that they have proven their worth and accessibility, students continue to use them and have made it a regular part of their dining experience," Beringer said via email.

Conversations around bringing the bots to campus surfaced shortly before the pandemic shut down the spring semester. George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, [successfully launched Starship robots in January 2019](#), and JMU decided to [follow suit](#) with a one-year deal.

The timing likely couldn't have been better. Starship's robots provide convenience and even ease of mind for students who'd rather skip lines and stay inside while COVID-19 is still a threat, while fewer students in dining halls makes social distancing easier for JMU Dining's staff.

"Starship was a great add on to [our] meal plan program, something we felt pre-COVID[-19] would make a lot of sense and do well on campus," Beringer said via email. "And we were right."

A half-dozen on-campus locations have embraced the robots, including Freshens Food Studio and Market 64's Java City in D-Hall, Festival Conference and Student Center's Burger Studio and Grab & Go, Chips Convenience Store and Starbucks in Carrier Library.

To use the service, students first download Starship's food delivery app from their phone before choosing a meal from a participating restaurant and selecting a pick-up location. A wheeled robot will deliver the meal for \$1.99 in roughly 30 to 60 minutes, and customers can track its progress before unlocking the robot via the app when it arrives.

Bella Smith, a freshman nursing major, said she's ordered from Starship once and is likely to again to avoid the cold and wait for food to arrive at her dorm.

"It's pretty easy [to order food with Starship]," Smith said. "There's kind of a long wait sometimes, but other than that, it's fine."

### To open or not to open: JMU Dining's decision-making process

JMU Dining made decisions to keep open or close on-campus restaurants based on logistics and safety — not profitability, Beringer said in the email.

When JMU instructed students living on-campus to go home from Sept. 7 to Oct. 5, less than half of those with meal plans stayed, Beringer said in the email, adding that JMU Dining then considered how it could operate safely and where it needed additional space based on which places were most popular.

For example, Qdoba was shuttered to allow for more line space at the ever-popular Chick-Fil-A, and limited traffic in the Student Success Center and the Engineering Geosciences Building led to the respective closures of Bistro 1908 and EnGeo's Provisions On Demand (P.O.D.) Market.



Denny's fast-casual concept's JMU launch a grand slam

"Like any business, in order to provide, you know, the meal plans to the students at the best possible rate, we try not to offer options that make no sense and cost money," Beringer told the Madison Business Review on Aug. 27.

On-campus dining locations — not including convenience-store markets — that closed starting Oct. 5 [per JMU Dining](#) include Qdoba and Steak 'n Shake in D-Hall, Bistro 1908 and Dunkin' Donuts in the Student Success Center, Starbucks in Rose Library, Subway in Grace Street Apartments, Corner Bistro in Memorial Hall and Lakeside Cafe in the College of Business building [recently named Hartman Hall](#).

Of those closed locations, only Dunkin' Donuts, Subway and Steak 'n Shake have since reopened.

Auntie Anne's in Madison Union also closed on Oct. 5 and is expected to reopen on Nov. 20, while Freshens Food Studio in UREC has been closed since Aug. 26 through the semester.

Grace Taylor, a freshman nursing major, went home in early September and has been underwhelmed by weekend on-campus dining options since returning. She said she hopes Dukes Dining will open since it provides plenty of options.

"I feel like during the week there's enough options, but on the weekend, like right now, it's like D-Hall and E-Hall open, and that's it," Taylor said. "So, it kinda makes it hard to, like, take something and go."

Despite closures and limited hours at many on-campus eateries, JMU Dining didn't furlough any hourly workers, Beringer said in the email. He added that JMU Dining is actively looking to hire and is recruiting students for jobs.

When asked if opening more restaurants would reduce the spread of the virus by limiting long lines and in-person huddles, Beringer simply said that guest behaviors like physical distancing, wearing masks and checking in via the LiveSafe app will stop the spread of COVID-19.

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#### MORE INFORMATION