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UMore Park as rich history

Tuesday, October 23, 2007

By Janet Kubat Willette

Agri News staff writer

ROSEMOUNT, Minn. -- The walls stand like giant tombstones along Highway 46 in Dakota County, providing motorists a glimpse of the past at UMore Park.

UMore Park, now a University of Minnesota property, was Gopher Ordnance Works in World War II. Prior to the war effort, the land was farmed and described as "one of the most versatile farming areas to be found in the entire Northwest," by former resident Thomas Corrigan in materials on file at the Dakota County Historical Society. The land was deeded to the university after the war.

The university has recently begun an effort to remake the land to create a university endowment.

Charles Muscoplat, the university's vice president for statewide strategic resource development, is leading the effort to create a sustainable university community.

"Hopefully, it's a model community," Muscoplat said, "but we won't have a campus there."

The development idea is in its infancy, with a series of public listening sessions recently concluded. The university is also in the middle of having the land assessed for gravel. When completed, there will be 450 to 500 holes dug 60 to 80 feet deep on the property to determine the quality and quantity of gravel available. The assessment should be completed by March or April, Muscoplat said.

Terry Holmes, board chairman of Empire Township, where part of UMore Park lies, said the university should finish gravel mining before development happens. There's so much need for gravel in the Twin



Cities, he said.

"I think their intentions are to do it right," Holmes said.

Dakota County Commissioner Joe Harris said the university has a saga of projects never completed at UMore Park. He's been a county commissioner for 27 years and this is his fifth land use study plan for UMore Park.

"I've yet to see anything happen," Harris said, adding they may get something done this time just to spite him.

A few years back, the university proposed a golf course for UMore Park, where all sorts of turf-related research would have happened. Harris got behind the idea and was selling it, only to have the university pull back. That was the last straw for him.

He's tired of the university spending millions of dollars on studies every few years only to put them on the shelf. If the university wants to develop the land, Harris said, it should sell it and let the developer work with the local community.

That doesn't fit the university's vision. The U of M wants to create a place where new school systems are designed, where health care delivery and traffic are studied, and where energy efficiency is part of daily life, Muscoplat said. This will be done without putting people under a microscope, he said.

The plan won't be put on the shelf, said Greg Cuomo, UMore Park operations director. The challenge is to develop a blueprint that lays out the requirements for development of the land, recognizing that the technology in energy production, for example, is rapidly changing.

The blueprint must define what it means to be energy efficient, what housing density is desired and what water quality standards need to be met, while at the same time recognizing the development of the property won't happen overnight.

"It will take many decades to develop, we think," Muscoplat said.

"Whatever we decide now has to be flexible," Cuomo added.

The U of M is trying to be innovative, thoughtful and systematic in its approach to planning for development, Cuomo said. The university can afford to be deliberate because there is no holding cost as there would be for a

private developer, he said.

"They're not pushing too fast," said Holmes of Empire Township. "I think they're trying to move slowly so they do what is right."

The university has been good about including neighboring government units in discussions, he said.

"They've really tried to include our planner, our engineers to keep them abreast of what's happening," he said.

At the same time, Holmes said the university can do whatever it wants.

"What the U is going to do, the U is going to do," he said.

The university's land grant status gives it special powers, Harris said.

Those special powers come with special responsibilities, Cuomo said. The university understands that it is open to criticism if it fails in its vision to develop a 21st century community.

The city of Rosemount, which borders UMore Park, has been involved with the university's planning process, said community development director Kim Lindquist.

"On the whole, I think the city is quite comfortable with some of the ideas the U put forward," Lindquist said, but the details need to be better understood.

The city prefers that the university start development on the western edge of its property and move eastward, which would make it easier to deliver services. Development and sale of the property would also bring it onto tax rolls, another benefit to the city.

Now, beef cows graze on lush, green grass at UMore, while concrete structures and smokestacks stand like sentinels.

The U wants to recycle the concrete, clean up any potential contamination -- the land is now being evaluated for pollution -- and begin moving research projects to the southern edge of its property.

The beef cattle and turkey research facilities will need to find new homes.

"The university fully intends to maintain it and keep it in the vicinity and is working with the industry,"

Muscoplat said.

Harris and Holmes hope the university continues its agricultural research.

"It's one of our huge concerns," Holmes said, as the township is home to many farmers.

Agricultural research is an asset to the agricultural community, Harris said.

Crop production research will continue, Cuomo said, but some longer-term projects will move to 2,840 acres the university is managing with the Department of Natural Resources.

The land will be transferred to the state in 2032 as part of the Gopher football stadium deal, but the university retains the right to use it for research and education forever.

The Lone Rock Trail is on this property and it will remain green space. The university will not put buildings on this parcel.

This property will be multi-use, Muscoplat said, with hunting, recreation and agriculture co-existing.