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WHERE YOU SEE VACANT LAND, U SEES UTOPIA**UNIVERSITY ENVISIONS MODEL COMMUNITY IN DAKOTA COUNTY**

PAUL TOSTO and MARICELLA MIRANDA, Pioneer Press

The University of Minnesota on Thursday unveiled a grand vision for a "life-enriching" community filled with culture, recreation, healthy living and renewable energy built on a sprawling, undeveloped tract it owns in Dakota County.

UMore Park would be transformed into a place where as many as 30,000 people would live, work and play, officials told university regents.

The plan isn't much more than sketches on paper at this point. U leaders said they would sharpen the focus in coming months and hope to have a detailed proposal in place by the end of 2008 if regents agree.

There are many potential obstacles, including paying to remove pollution from the remains of a World War II Army gunpowder plant on the site. Still, officials said the plan offered a way to develop the land responsibly over 20 to 30 years in a way that would make money but also preserve the U's research needs and its principles.

It would be "a community imbued with university values," said Charles Muscoplat, former dean of the U's college of agriculture, who's led the panel examining UMore's future. He says he's been talking to Dakota County officials about how the project could be a model for how to live well.

The plan would not demand a lot of up-front money, said Muscoplat, adding that the U could pay for much of the planning and other initial costs by selling concrete from the remains of buildings on the site and by mining gravel deposits.

Eventually, the U would sell land to developers who'd do the building. That's a change from the university's historical stance, but "you have to do something with the land. Doing nothing is not an option," Muscoplat said.

UMore (University of Minnesota Outreach, Research and Education) Park's 12 square miles, larger than the city of Oakdale, were deeded to the U by the U.S. military in 1947.

It is now home to university research operations in agriculture, landscape architecture, biological sciences and veterinary medicine. The U also leases land to tenants, including a police gun range and a Minnesota Public Radio broadcast tower.

Last spring, the U agreed to swap the state 2,840 environmentally sensitive acres of the 7,700-acre UMore tract for cash to build a campus football stadium. They also commissioned a consultant to come up with a "big vision" for the property.

The U isn't speculating on the potential windfall but it could be huge. Its consultant estimated the land was worth roughly \$30,000 an acre, which puts the value of the remaining tract at about \$150 million.

Whatever route is chosen, U officials say they want to work in harmony with Dakota

County leaders.

Dakota County Commissioner Will Branning, who represents Rosemount and Apple Valley, said he encourages the university to develop the land into a research center. But he questions what the new community would mean for neighboring cities and Dakota County in terms of roads and highways.

"You can't build an island," Branning said. "You have to build a community that connects with neighbors and the whole region. I would have some apprehension jumping into building a city from scratch without having taxing ability."

Rosemount Mayor Bill Droste said Thursday that U officials began working with the city about a year ago on plans for the park. He envisions the new community as a great opportunity for Rosemount -- one that could attract others to the south metro.

"What they announced today, it sounds like it could be very exciting," Droste said.

Muscoplat says the U has looked for inspiration to a similar effort in Denver to redevelop the site of Stapleton Airport and another by the University of British Columbia.

The U and the federal government are talking about who's responsible for cleaning up any pollution from the gunpowder site. An analysis of the pollution and its costs is expected by next summer.

Go to www.umorepark.umn.edu to read more about the plans to develop UMore Park. Paul Tosto can be reached at 651-228-2119 or ptosto@pioneerpress.com.

Map

UMore Park