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Vision emerges for UMore

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There are plenty of big ideas in the University of Minnesota's plans for its UMore Park development in Empire Township. Just how many of those ideas become reality, though, remains to be seen.

The University released several reports last week laying out what Carla Carlson, assistant vice president for statewide strategic resource development, called a "50,000-foot view" of the project in areas such as health, transportation and education. The reports lay out a city where residents will be able to walk or bike past a variety of public art, where gathering places are plentiful and where on-site solar and wind power generators produce much of the electricity used by residents.

"They're pretty high-end principles," Carlson said. "There is tremendous work to be done in really listing out very specific goals and strategies and priorities underneath those and then thinking what would be the best way to move forward? How can we move forward with some of these really interesting ideas?"

University committees used input from residents, collected at several meetings last summer, to produce the reports. The University and a consultant it has hired for the project will in turn use the reports as they develop a clearer plan of what the development, expected to bring 20,000 to 30,000 new residents to the area in the next 25 years, will look like.

Bob Johns, director of the University of Minnesota's Center for Transportation Studies, was a co-chair of the committee that studied transportation issues. He said looking at what is essentially a blank slate with a goal of creating the best transportation system possible was an interesting process. His committee ultimately imagined a community with sidewalks and bike trails laid out in a way that makes getting around without a car more appealing to residents. The committee also imagined a development where options such as personal golf carts give residents more choices for short trips.

A committee formed to study interdisciplinary options on the site called for lots of public art and an integration of existing structures from the Gopher Ordinance plant that formerly occupied the site into the new development.

There is no shortage of big-picture thinking, but will any of it actually show up when construction starts?

"That's the million dollar question," Johns said. "Our charge was to put out a vision that would be sort of the perfect world.

"That remains to be seen ... how close, ultimately, the developer can come to realizing that vision and still have a development that's desirable for people to buy a home there."

John Adams, co-chair of the interdisciplinary committee, which looked at topics that did not readily fit into another category, believes there are goals in the reports that can be realized once development starts.

"I think it's realistic when you have a chance to do something new in a large space of the sort that isn't available normally and with the participation of a university that has a lot of resources and a series of local communities that are interested in what's going on and interested in participating," Adams said. "Throw them a challenge."

The economy could ultimately decide how much of what is in the University's reports shows up in real life, but Carlson said it's not a stretch to believe there is an opportunity to create a unique development.

"I think it's fair to say that when you look across the United States at the kind of communities that are being created now — the energy-efficient housing and the LEED standards — those are things that are happening. What we can do in this community is set the bar a little higher."

Timeline

The University of Minnesota is currently working with a consultant to determine the value of aggregate material on the UMore site. Mining of that aggregate is expected to pay for much of the development's planning. Carlson expects a final report this spring.

The University is also working with the Army Corps of Engineers on an evaluation of the site. Carlson expects that report by late spring or summer.