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Rosemount neighbors have big stake in U plans

By **SARAH LEMAGIE**, Star Tribune

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The futuristic community sketched out for nearly 8 square miles of land owned by the University of Minnesota in Rosemount could include light rail, eco-friendly businesses and homes with geothermal heat.

A haven for cutting-edge technology and research in Dakota County could be the legacy of today's U of M leaders, "but we will be living with it," said Kim Lindquist, Rosemount's acting city administrator.

Local officials are taking a keen interest as the university ponders the fate of UMore Park, a swath of largely open land west of Hwy. 52 that now holds a modest agricultural research station and remnants of a World War II gunpowder factory.

The university will hold public meetings this month on four possible plans that call for mining gravel from the land, then developing a sustainable community: housing, industry, parks and up to 30,000 people.

Several city and county officials have already expressed enthusiasm for the concept, which could take more than 20 years to realize.

"I'm excited that it's going to happen in my lifetime," said Will Branning, a longtime Dakota County commissioner who said he has seen several ideas for using the land spark and then sputter out.

Over the years, the U has toyed with plans that ranged from selling the land piecemeal to building a golf course, said university Vice President Charles Muscoplat, point man on UMore. But this time, the Board of Regents has given planners unprecedented support to explore the possibilities, he said.

Several basic elements of the vision make sense to Rosemount officials, including the assumption that the land ultimately will be developed.

Because of costs such as building sewer lines to new homes as Rosemount grows, "having a large void in the center of the community is a more expensive proposition for the city in the long run," Lindquist said. "A development pattern that allows us to reach the eastern part of the city without having to cross through a no man's land is beneficial for us."

The city will want to make sure UMore Park doesn't become a "separate enclave" within Rosemount, but the option the university appears to favor has a nice mix of housing, she said. "It's not just a bedroom community plopped into the center of the city."

And developing land in big chunks can result in better trails, parks and other benefits for residents. "You can do a much better job in large pieces instead of breaking it off," said

Rosemount Mayor Bill Droste.

But some neighbors have mixed feelings about changing the landscape. "Some of it, I would like to see stay agricultural," said Richard Brand, a farmer who serves on a UMore advisory panel. "It's very good cropland."

The university leases some of the land to more than 40 farmers and small-business owners who would have to make way for other users. But no one will be asked to leave until it's necessary, Muscoplat said. "Almost everybody will have many years' notice before they have to relocate."

Plans also call for a thorough clean-up of environmental contamination left behind by the gunpowder factory. That should lay to rest the long-held concerns of some neighbors, Droste said. "To resolve all those issues and questions, I consider that a positive."

But development also raises questions: Just how innovative would UMore become? What if some new technology doesn't work? And who would be in charge of the community?

As university property, UMore isn't governed by local laws the way that most land is, but the university could settle on a solution as simple as selling the land to a developer and putting it back under local jurisdiction, Muscoplat said.

And regardless of what the U decides to do, it's working hard to include local residents in the conversation. This time around, "We hope we have more traction -- and a better idea," Muscoplat said.

Sarah Lemagie • 952-882-9016

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