

U compares four plans for UMore Park, a 'community of the future' in Dakota County

By **JEFF SHELMAN**, Star Tribune

June 11, 2008

Far from its Twin Cities campus, the University of Minnesota is moving forward with its vision for transforming a massive piece of Dakota County.

UMore Park -- at roughly 5,000 acres, larger than St. Louis Park -- will potentially become a city of more than 20,000 people, financed in its first stages by gravel mining. Today, the university's Board of Regents will see four visions of what the land just west of U.S. Hwy. 52 in Rosemount could become.

While the regents won't decide immediately which plan to pursue -- several public forums will be held on campus and in Dakota County over the next month -- the university says it's committed to building a community of the future on the Twin Cities' rural fringe.

UMore Park is touted as a community grounded in sustainability.

Other tenets would be life-long learning and academic research, part of the university's land grant mission.

"If we develop the area, as a single owner of 5,000 acres, we can control the destiny of the area," said University of Minnesota vice president Charles Muscoplat, the university's point man on UMore Park. "It's much different than a farmer sells his farm to developers. We are committed to try to push the envelope in terms of innovation."

To pay for it, the university has a more down-to-earth plan: Blast the gravel out of a portion of the property. Some think the U of M is simply trying to flip the land for a quick buck and wonder if innovation and the generation of significant revenue can be accomplished together.

Ann Forsyth did some work on UMore Park planning when she was director of the U of M's Metropolitan Design Center. She left the university last year and now works at Cornell University.

"There are these huge contradictions about it, and there are these unrealistic ideas that it can both make money in the short run and be a model community," Forsyth said.

Valuable land

During World War II, the War Department acquired 12,000 acres of Dakota County for a gunpowder factory. After the war, the government deeded much of that land to the university. It was far from the Twin Cities, and for more than 50 years, its fields and forests were home to some research projects but little other activity. Today, there's only a single house on it.

Now the growth of Dakota County has reached the land's edge, sparking a new interest in its potential to make money for the university. In 2006, the university traded some of the original UMore Park land to the state to be used as a park. In exchange, the university got increased funding for TCF Bank Stadium. Also that year, the regents voted to make the land ready for development.

"We think it is a better use of the land and a better use of the resources [to develop] than it is to have it be insufficiently used as a research station, as it is now," university President Robert Bruininks said. "In the long term, this land is much more valuable for other purposes given its proximity to the airport and southern metropolitan area."

The university has hired a consultant in preparation for an environmental impact statement on the property. If the conditions are acceptable, the university will begin to exploit what it believes is among the biggest remaining sources of aggregate in the Twin Cities. Proceeds from the mining -- likely tens of millions of dollars -- will be used first to recoup the university's investments to date.

Gravel mining likely wouldn't begin on the site until 2011 or 2012. Muscoplat said there is the potential for "decades" of gravel mining, but that mining and adjacent development could happen at the same time.

While generating money from the property is one of the university's priorities, officials say they want UMore Park to be much more than just another suburban subdivision. The university sees UMore Park as a place where cutting-edge ideas in areas ranging from energy to health care to education can be tested. Early ideas include a health and wellness complex, a futuristic library and other facilities powered by wind turbines and solar panels.

"To me, this is more about doing it right and living up to the university's research and education mission than it is about making money," Bruininks said.

Innovation is expensive

Not everyone familiar with the vision is convinced that the financial equation will work, and they question the wisdom of developing a new city far from the core of the Twin Cities.

"It's expensive because you're putting all of this new innovative infrastructure in up-front and you don't recoup it in the long run," Forsyth said. "That kind of counteracts the quick money side of it."

Forsyth said a model community would be much more practical near the university's St. Paul campus rather than in Dakota County.

"It would have to be a fantastic development to counteract its location," she said. "There is no way you're not going to have a number of traffic concerns coming out of it. Unless it is highly designed and then it becomes very expensive."

Barbara Lukermann, a senior fellow emeritus in the U of M's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, likes the idea of an innovative community and thinks UMore Park has potential for energy innovation.

"I was less clear, quite frankly, on what could be done with education and health, which are two other themes of research," Lukermann said. "That's my concern: Can we follow through with the imagination? Very evidently, the university sees this as a resource and sometimes those goals don't mesh -- trying to maximize the financial payback and the innovation that could be there. I'm in a wait-and-see position right now."

University leaders contend that UMore Park isn't simply an asset that will be turned for some quick cash.

"We are certainly trying to maximize our return, but we're willing to do it over time," Muscoplat said. "We have a public responsibility to do it right. If we do the best job at doing this, we think we can make more money than if we just sold the land."

Jeff Shelman • 612-673-7478

© 2008 Star Tribune. All rights reserved.