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U of M pitches 'sustainable community' for UMore

Trey Mewes, Intern

Rosemount Town Pages - 06/27/2008

After months of preparation and weeks of presentations, UMore park concept plans were unveiled last week at a public forum at the Rosemount Community Center.

The University of Minnesota revealed four concept plans for the UMore park property earlier this month to the university board of regents. Since then, the university office of statewide strategic resources development has presented UMore park plans to Dakota County commissioners, Rosemount's city council, Empire Township board and the public.

The four concept plans were narrowed down from about 30 plans created by Design Workshop Inc., the company hired by the university to help development planning.

The Traditional plan calls for affordable housing to sustain a population of about 23,000. It would also allow the U of M to mine a significant amount of gravel from the property. However, the low-density population creates a few problems for the community. There wouldn't be major employment opportunities in the area, nor would there be a large variety of housing options. The population density would be too small to warrant public rail transportation, but the area would most likely be served with public busing. The most important disadvantage to the U, school representatives said, is there would be little opportunity for sustainability and innovation, key themes around which the U wants to build the UMore community.

The university presented four plans, but one, which focuses on creating a 'sustainable community,' appears to be a clear favorite.

The plan calls for a community which combines aspects of the other three concept plans. It also has the largest overview summary and the fewest negative aspects listed on the UMore park web site.

"It was a little bit of the best of all the others," said Charles Muscoplat, university vice president for statewide strategic resources development.

The sustainable community concept plan calls for an eco-industrial park as well as a research park in order to provide housing and work that would come to fruition using university innovations and research. There would be a large enough population density to use light rail transit systems, using three transit stations university officials have mapped out. There would be a large variety of housing options, and major employment opportunities for research as well as environmentally friendly businesses. Close to 500 acres of UMore property would be mined for gravel, creating opportunities to put in lakes and wetlands. Windmill and geothermal energy would power houses and businesses. Homes could have individual pumps and businesses could tap the large groundwater lakes that would be created from gravel mining projects. This would provide a majority of heating for the community, according to Muscoplat.

Although public turnout was good, there were several skeptics when university officials presented to the Empire Township board Tuesday. The concerns were based on past university proposals for the property that never came to fruition.

"I really don't wanna be paying more taxes because this plan doesn't go through," one audience member said.

Though the university has yet to figure out exactly how to finance the project, gravel mining and development is expected to help finance much of the project, and the area is expected to have significant economic benefits for both the university and the region.

Empire Township planner Dean Johnson appeared apprehensive after university officials made their presentation to the township board. He told university officials he still has a copy of a 1975 university plan for UMore Park that never came to fruition, and said several plans had since come and gone since he worked for the city of Rosemount starting in 1977. Muscoplat said this plan was different, because the current plan has passed a resolution by the board of regents, a supportive university president and the means to go through with the project, something the other plans haven't had.

Empire Township Engineer Brian Hilgardner recommended university officials make even more clear that scenario four, the new sustainable community scenario, is the one the U of M will pursue, in order to clear up confusion over the other scenarios.

“It’s obvious that’s what the U wants,” Hilgardner said.

Although Muscoplat said the university favors scenario 4 during his presentation to the township board, he told Hilgardner the board of regents had yet to vote on which scenario to go forward with. He also made clear the board of regents’ instructions to get feedback from the community around the UMore park property before approving any scenario.

University officials and township board members will meet later on this month for further discussions over the property.

Although several businesses have expressed interest in building on the property once the final plan is drawn up, Muscoplat said university officials haven’t considered which companies will be a part of the proposed community. They may start considerations at some time next year. Questions also remain as to whether the community will be annexed into Rosemount or if it will become its own community.

Public sentiments will be reported to the university board of regents in September, and the board will vote on a final plan before the end of the year. At some point this summer, the university and the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency will receive the results of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineer’s report on the property.

This will be the start of much environmental analysis, according to Muscoplat. The board of regents approved a contract June 12 to conduct several Environmental Impact Statements on the property, which may start as early as July 4. A gravel EIS, groundwater EIS and an Alternative Urban Areawide Review will be conducted on the property to find out the level of contaminants left by the Gopher Ordinance Works plant, a WWII factory which produced smokeless gunpowder and other goods for most of 1945. It will take about three years to complete all three EISes before the university can move forward with gravel mining and finding partners for land development.

Muscoplat told the Empire Township board that regardless of which scenario is chosen, university officials will call for the Army Corps to clean the entire Gopher Works Ordinance area.

“It would be my intention to convince the Army Corps that the property should be cleaned from A to Z, north to south,” Muscoplat said. “We’re gonna try to make this right as we understand what’s there.”

The plans for UMore park and the adjacent Vermillion Highlands aren’t set in stone, and comprehensive concept planning will continue on the property. One of the key reasons the university wants to make UMore park into a sustainable community is to leave a legacy of the university’s values and good will. Holmes pointed out that UMore Park and Vermillion Highland’s legacy means more than just the university’s good will. It will be a legacy of county residents as well.

“That legacy is not just yours,” Holmes said. “It’s ours, too.”