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The 'Brewery' revitalization: Arts, creativity, light industrial

KATHLEEN COOPER; The News Tribune

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After a summer of outreach and brainstorming, the first draft of a Brewery District revitalization plan envisions a place that focuses on the arts, creativity and light industrial uses.

Since the city revised Tacoma's downtown plan late last year, it has been checking in with business owners and residents in the neighborhood to discuss the future of the area between the Dome District and the University of Washington Tacoma.

Creative workers already are there, including public glass-blowing facility M-Space and the Robert Daniel Art Gallery. The district is close to the Tacoma School of the Arts and to museums, and the warehouses lend themselves to flexible purposes.

But the Brewery District's old brick buildings are underutilized. Fewer than 1,000 people live in the neighborhood. At 410,000 square feet over several properties, the city owns quite a bit of land there.

Most importantly, the historic area sits between the Dome District and the University of Washington Tacoma campus, both growing and reaching out for connection. The university recently updated its master plan to reflect its need for student services now that it has become a four-year school.

"Our 46-acre footprint is not large for the campus we envision," university spokesman Mike Wark said. "If we can put student services nearby, that would be good to explore."

As for revitalizing the area, start small, said representatives of VIA Architecture during a presentation last week. Create some spaces – on city-owned property, say – where artists and artisans can do their thing and people can come to see it, and buy it, and maybe have some coffee. Make the district a place where people want to be, then guide the development that will naturally follow.

VIA's ideas were presented Tuesday in a 75-page draft to the Hillside Development Council. About 17 people crowded into a conference room on Tacoma Avenue. District business interests, including The Swiss co-owner Jack McQuade and Michael Tobiason of Chihuly Studios, sat shoulder to shoulder with University of Washington Tacoma representatives.

Kate Howe and Alan Hart of Via Architecture led a three-hour discussion about balancing preservation with the need to create a "heart" for the district. There was talk of the Brewery District being a "hinge" to get people from the downtown core to Freighthouse Square. But the analogies kept coming back to anatomy.

"Part of this exercise is to find what the bones are in this body – the bones that work," David Wright told the group. He's with Tacoma architecture and engineering firm BCRA, which is working on a separate city contract to strengthen connections between downtown's neighborhoods.

This summer, Seattle-based VIA took a look at the Brewery District and talked to more than a dozen groups with interests there. Their task was to ensure that the city's downtown plan, updated in 2008, still contained an accurate vision for the district. They also were to recommend street designs and development strategies that could help it fill up with people.

Peter Huffman, planning division manager for the city's economic development department, said the city is planning a

public workshop the week of Nov. 16 at which anyone can see VIA's presentation and comment. Huffman said that by early next year, he'll have a presentation for the City Council. If they like what they see, they can endorse it and instruct the city manager to start rolling.

Here are some of the key issues:

CITY-OWNED PROPERTY

The 6.2-acre vacant parcel bounded by Jefferson and Tacoma avenues between South 21st and 23rd streets

This is the largest chunk of open space in the district and easily the most coveted. The city acquired it through purchases and condemnation in the 1990s when it wanted to build a new police headquarters. But the city decided to put the police headquarters on Pine Street instead.

Since then, the land has fallowed – first holding abandoned buildings, then later, after the buildings were torn down, homeless camps that became a magnet for drugs and prostitution. With heavy neighborhood involvement, that was cleaned up. Now it is a massive swath of open space with prime views of downtown, the Foss Waterway and Mount Rainier.

One of VIA Architecture's sketches shows just how prime the location is. It's adjacent to several converging growth zones: The UWT campus to the north, the historic breweries to the southeast and neighborhoods to the southwest. It also is just across Jefferson Avenue from the Jet Building, which Dale Chihuly is selling. The buyer, a Kirkland-based development firm, has said it's interested in talking to the UWT about possible uses.

Long-time Brewery District advocates remain skeptical that the city parcel will be put to the best use. Two members of the Hillside Development Council remember at least three possible development deals the city has rejected.

“That's the jewel in the crown,” said Gary Schelhammer, who owns property and lives nearby. “The views, the campus, the direct access to the freeway” down 21st Street. Schelhammer said that for the past two summers, he's tried to get the city to meet with foreign investors who he said were interested in buying the property. He declined to name them.

Another HDC member, real estate agent Shauna Walker, tried with investors to buy the property for development in 2005 for \$5 million. She was stymied at the time because the city was trying to work on a deal so the cash-strapped UWT could buy it, even though it wasn't and has never been part of the school's footprint. City officials said at the time that they didn't want the urban school to have its growth limited.

“Nothing is going to happen to that property without the UW's permission,” Walker said last week. “So they are the gorilla. I love the UW, don't get me wrong.”

University spokesman Wark agreed that the school is interested in what happens on the parcel because it's so close to campus.

“Integrating with the economic development plan in this district has always been a primary concern for us when looking at that property,” he said.

Huffman, of the city's economic development department, said the city had to decide what is the “highest and best return” for the land – cash for taxpayers in a straight real estate sale, or using it to spark other development that's better for the city's future.

He acknowledged the importance of the UWT in the decision-making process.

“They clearly are a key stakeholder organization,” Huffman said. “Their vision can really affect how that area develops and the opportunities. They've done a wonderful job with redeveloping historic buildings and bringing in employment and students that are customers. They've got a good track record as being an urban campus.

“Then you've got this large footprint,” he said. “When it is built out it will be a huge influence.”

Streets and grounds properties: 140,000 square feet over multiple buildings along Jefferson Avenue between South 23rd and 25th streets

This property includes these three chunks:

- 27,000 square-foot, 300-foot-long City Shops and Stable at South 23rd and C streets
- 45,000 square-foot Municipal Complex between South Holgate and Hood streets
- 68,000 square-foot, 675-foot long Streets and Grounds Maintenance Yard on Jefferson Avenue between South 23rd and 25th streets

The city's Streets and Grounds Division operates from an old horse barn warehouse and stores its trucks and supplies on a lot that marks the entrance to an abandoned underground railroad tunnel.

Huffman said part of the goal of the planning study was to explore, from a "high-level conceptual idea," what the best use of these properties would be.

"The city can be out front, and be a catalyst," he said. And any new use of these buildings will require city operations to be moved elsewhere.

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON TACOMA

The urban campus's 46-acre legislatively approved footprint is bounded by Tacoma and Pacific avenues and South 17th and 21st streets. They estimate that in five to 10 years they'll have 5,000 students, up from the current 3,000.

Wark said the university is a year away from completing a study on the need for housing and student services.

"We have to plan so carefully," he said. "We have to make sure that the plans we make now take care of the needs not only of the students now but so that we're on the right track in 10, 20, 100 years."

According to VIA's presentation, the UWT plans to build two auxiliary residence halls by 2012 or 2013 to house about 350 students. By 2017, about 650 students are expected to live on campus.

"They're a wonderful asset to have down the street," said Rollie Herman, president of Westpac Marine and of the Hillside Development Council. "You'll find dissenting conversation with people who own property within the footprint, but that's a business thing.

"They have the big stick," he said, "but for the most part they want the neighborhood to succeed."

PRAIRIE LINE

This is the line that in 1873 brought the first Northern Pacific train to tidewater on the West Coast. The city has planned for it to become a bike and walking path from the Foss, through the UWT and on to South 27th Street.

Ryan Petty, the head of the city's economic development department, said he's leading the city's negotiations with Burlington Northern-Santa Fe Corp. about acquiring a 20-foot-wide swath along the Prairie Line from South 27th Street to the South 15th Street bridge.

Petty said the swath includes the existing rails but is not always centered on the rails.

This makes the trail segment more interesting since it's not a straight line, he said, but it also helps the city avoid acquiring property where it would have to build retaining walls or other reinforcing structures that would make trail development more expensive.

The exception to the 20-foot swath is between South 23rd and 25th streets, where the Prairie Line runs between the city's streets and grounds properties.

There, they're trying to get 85 feet so that the properties are all connected.

"We are cautiously optimistic about completing this work together during 2010, and hopefully by the end of June 2010," he said.

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