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Students, City, UND Aim to Enhance Livability Through Destination Districts

By Anna Burleson

UND and city officials are once again looking at creating vibrancy districts for students to engage more with the community, and this time they say it's going to be different.

In March, the city and university began working with consulting firm Brailsford and Dunlavey, which gathered input from a variety of stakeholders and found districts could be created in downtown Grand Forks, within UND's campus and along the 42nd Street corridor.

"This is something that's honestly really important to students," UND Student Body President Matt Kopp said. "They come to UND for an education, but they also come to college to enjoy life and have a good experience, and this is an important initiative to make that happen."

Officials said the partnership of the city, university and UND's Student Government is what will spur the movement forward. This will include improving transportation, creating gathering spaces and completing a market study to decide what kinds of businesses could flourish in these areas and draw students according to [a final report from the Washington D.C.-based firm](#).

"This is the first step," city spokesman Pete Haga said. "We've heard loud and clear we need to do something in absolute and direct action to create opportunities for vibrancy."

Mayor Mike Brown said a more concrete plan will be completed in October in time for a joint meeting with all stakeholders.

Former UND Student Body President Tanner Franklin began the push for a vibrancy district in the fall of 2014. After seeing pushback, he's glad and excited the project is finally off the ground.

"It's one thing a plan comes out but I really hope the university and city take steps toward making a change," he said.

Different districts

This plan is a little more concrete than efforts in past years, but [the report's](#) recommendations remain vague. It recommends developing downtown into a vibrancy district by adding "unique destinations and community events" inclusive of those under 21 years old.

UND spokesman Peter Johnson said bars and taverns aren't out of the picture, but the plan will appeal to all ages.

"I see this as a piece of that overall puzzle as we're thinking about how we move forward as a community and create that vibrancy for all of us," he said.

Kopp said students really want to see 42nd Street developed, as many are moving to live there "in droves" and one of the only places to eat or get coffee is Tim Horton's.

"You can only eat doughnuts so many times," he said.

Haga also said UND's School of Entrepreneurship will be involved, so students interested in starting a business could potentially open in one of the three districts, a decision Franklin also supported when he began having conversations about community vibrancy.

Brown said this will give students a buy-in with the community and make them want to stay in Grand Forks.

Transportation also will play a key role, as the report states 42nd Street would include bike lanes through existing developments and businesses. A comprehensive transportation plan would need to be developed to link everything together.

Haga said discussions with the city's Transportation Department include the concept of creating a light rail speedy transit system with busses. This would include updating bus stops with Wifi and developing an app that would track incoming busses, which would also have Wifi.

Officials said they're not concerned about funding the endeavor as private sector investments will play a large role and North Dakota's booming economy will also draw interest.

The Brailsford and Dunlavey report cost \$13,000, with UND paying \$5,000, Haga said. Dividing up consultant or any other costs in the future hasn't been discussed but the UND Student Senate voted this past spring to allocate \$12,000 to a vibrancy project.

"We're an entrepreneurial state and an entrepreneurial community and we want to nurture that spirit," Johnson said.

What's next

Market data is being gathered, Haga said, and he has found the restaurant Chipotle is in high demand, but they will be looking at both local and big business opportunities.

He said the plan is to use the market research to entice private businesses to come to the planned districts for 42nd Street, downtown and the UND campus.

"So we can go to Chipotle or Starbucks or a local retailer or whatever and say, 'What you need to make money, we have it,'" Haga said.

The consultant report recommends steps, including developing a master plan, conducting market analysis to find gaps in food, retail and housing, creating master plans for community vibrancy and transportation, and exploring an economic development mechanism to encourage private investment in the districts. Mayor Brown said the recommendations will be treated more like "guidelines."

As the fall semester starts at UND, input will be gathered from the community and Kopp will spearhead surveying students to find out what they want most in a district.

"It's just the right time in our community to be looking at addressing this and we want a place that's fun to live and retain our students," Brown said. "That's why their voice is very important."

Above all, officials stressed collaboration between all entities, including existing vibrancy groups and initiatives established in March, and working in tandem with the public art corridor planned for 42nd Street.

"It's not the sole responsibility of the university to provide vibrancy, we want to partner with our community to provide that," UND President Robert Kelley said.