

Land use experts mull possible redevelopment around the medical center

By Thomas Bailey Jr.

Thursday, January 16, 2014

Memphis' medical district is a bustling expanse of hospitals, research centers and colleges employing 17,000 workers.

Located around and even inside the 14,000-acre district, however, are blocks of struggling commercial neighborhoods.

Now, a project is taking shape to look for ways the neighborhoods can ride the coattails of the medical center's success.

A half-dozen urban planners from across the nation Wednesday toured in and around the Memphis medical center.

"Is it still an arena?" Llana Preuss, vice president of Smart Growth America, asked as the tour bus drove by The Pyramid. Told the building will become a Bass Pro Shop, she asked, "Will it have rock climbing inside?"

The bus passed the mammoth Sears Crosstown building as the planners were told of its impending revival. "You should be proud," said Adam Thies, director of the Department of Metropolitan Development in Indianapolis. "That's a huge win."

They're here at the invitation of Mayor AC Wharton, who wants to create an "innovation business district" to both serve and leverage the concentration of hospitals, life sciences companies and high education resources in the medical district near Downtown.

Wharton himself is leveraging his fellowship in the Urban Land Institute's Daniel Rose Center for Public Leadership in Land Use to host the experts.

Rose Center representatives will present their preliminary findings on the Medical Center innovation district 9 to 11 a.m. on Friday at the Memphis Bioworks office, 20 Dudley.

Other planners touring in Memphis included: Susan Anderson, director of planning and sustainability for Portland, Ore.; Janne Corneil of Corneil Collaborative Planning & Urban Design in Carlisle, Mass.; Gayle Farris GB Farris Strategies in New York; Robert Iopa, president of WCIT Architecture in Honolulu; and Jim Schumacher of Schumacher Urban Projects in Matthews, NC.

The local team tapped by Wharton for the project comprises Reid Dulberger, Memphis's chief economic development officer, Maura Sullivan, Memphis's deputy chief administrative officer, and Josh Whitehead, director of the Office of Planning & Development, all of whom are also 2013-14 Rose Center fellows; and Gregory Love, senior planner for OPD. Archie Willis III, president of Community Capital, a Memphis development consultant, represents the Urban Land Institute's Memphis chapter Memphis on the project.

Memphis, Honolulu, Indianapolis and Portland were chosen for the 2013-2014 Rose fellowships.

ULI is a research and education organization that focuses on the responsible use of land and building thriving communities.

Its Rose Center provides public officials with information, best practices, peer networks, and other resources.

Rose Center executive director Jess Zimbabwe said after the tour that the Memphis fellows on Friday will essentially receive advice and "homework" from their peer fellows from other cities. "It's about helping them build their capacity to learn how to be leaders in a big, complex land-use challenge like this," she said.

"We are very excited to work with Mayor Wharton and his team to help make the innovation district proposal become a reality," Zimbabwe had said in an earlier release. "The goal is to leverage the area's human capital, facilities and existing activities to attract and nurture research, development and technology commercialization, all within a reinvigorated mixed-use urban neighborhood."

Also in a prepared statement, Wharton said, "The ULI Daniel Rose Fellowship program is an outstanding opportunity for Memphis to pull together entrepreneurial resources to transform a vital area of our inner city core.

"The medical district has the knowledge base, tremendous opportunity for growth, and the infrastructure that position it to be a world-class hub of innovation, collaboration and entrepreneurship to deliver products and services to individuals and businesses around the globe. We must find ways to protect, expand and create a global identity for this significant part of the city. We are most fortunate to have so many creative minds and innovative thinkers assisting us in this effort."



