

Planners map ways to spark life in Medical Center, Edge District

By Thomas Bailey Jr.

Saturday, January 18, 2014

Many different signs of various styles, colors and sizes greet visitors who drive through the Memphis Medical Center along Union:

Methodist University Hospital, Methodist Healthcare, Southern College of Optometry, Church Health Center, Baptist College of Health Sciences, an orange “UT,” UT-Baptist Research Park, and University of Tennessee Health Science Center, to name a few.

But the most important sign is missing, say [urban planners who came to Memphis from across the nation last week](#). There are no districtwide signs that not only pull all the branded institutions under one umbrella, but also show visitors and patients where to go.

The planners traveled here as part of an Urban Land Institute fellowship program to advise Memphis on how to improve its 14,000-acre medical district and spread the center’s vibrancy to the neighboring Edge District.

Among their other recommendations was to greatly shrink the Memphis Medical Center’s boundaries. The 17,000-employee district now encompasses vast areas far away from the cluster of hospitals and research facilities anchored by Regional Medical Center at Memphis, University of Tennessee Health Science Center, Le Bonheur Children’s Hospital and the Memphis VA Medical Center.

The planners also [recommended the city more sharply define the Edge District](#), both for its quirky or “edgy” character and for its geography. They suggested shrinking the Edge District boundaries between Union and Madison, with Monroe serving as the neighborhood spine;

Among their other recommendations:

- Beautify the I-240/I-40 interchange, which so many patients and visitors use to drive to the Medical Center;
- Improve connectivity and circulation between the Medical Center and Downtown with looping transportation routes;
- Create or enhance open spaces and parks between Downtown and the Medical

Center, including a conversion of a parking lot on Pauline near the VA Medical Center into a new park;

-- Program more activities for public spaces, using food trucks, farmer's markets and festivals to Health Sciences Park (formerly Forrest Park);

-- Create a commons area, a meeting ground, for all the Medical Center employees and visitors;

-- Establish a high-quality day-care for Medical Center workers;

-- Embrace the old industrial spaces and warehouses in the Edge District, using them to attract a new generation that makes things;

-- Support an array of new jobs, including the crafts, in the Medical Center and Edge District, not just jobs for those with high incomes or advanced degrees; similarly, encourage new housing stock in the Edge District that accommodates a variety of income groups;

-- Burnish an "edgy" identity for the Edge District, celebrating its uniqueness. For example, support the whiffle ball league that plays in the parking lot between Kudzu's bar and International Baptist Church. Do some crowd-source fundraising to improve the whiffle ball field;

-- Facilitate small industrial spaces where things are made in small batches;

-- Create a business improvement district for the Edge neighborhood;

-- Identify streets that can be transformed into "complete streets," which are more appealing and safer for walkers and cyclists with features like tree shade, bike paths, improved storefronts, and better sidewalks;

-- Establish a rehab building code that's more flexible and less expensive to follow than codes for new construction;

The visiting planners assigned the Memphis ULI fellows and local officials "homework" to complete before the fellows reconvene for a retreat in Vancouver in April.

The tasks are: Document any existing network and relationships within the district; collect data on parcel ownership, building types and the availability of property for sale or rent; map the small businesses by industry type; hold at least two events in Health Sciences Park; convene all the stakeholders within the Medical Center to identify their shared physical infrastructure; and list businesses that might be interested in moving to the Edge District.



