North Omaha Development Project

(This is the next in a series of weekly articles focused on individual visions for the economic future of North Omaha. This week we feature the comments of steering committee member Daniel Burkey, vice president for Administration & Finance at Creighton University.)

Who:

Dan Burkey represents Creighton University in his responsibility on the North Omaha Development Project steering committee. He is vice president for Administration & Finance. As a major institution positioned right on the edge of the North Omaha study area, this is an opportune moment for the university to help forge important economic improvements.

"We want to coordinate our planning efforts with those of the study so that we can make sure we are providing mutually beneficial opportunities where we can," Burkey said. "We have a large healthcare practice with our medical, dental, nursing and pharmacy schools. There may be opportunities from a service provider's standpoint, where we could partner with someone or locate our facilities where it makes sense in the community."

Where:

Burkey highlights the fact that Creighton University is an urban campus employing roughly 3,000 workers who in turn serve a student

body of 7,000 people. There is, therefore, a considerable population resting along parts of the periphery of the area. And area businesses stand to benefit from that potential consumer base.

“We’re bordered by businesses, the neighboring community and the interstate,” he said. “As we expand, we could eventually grow into some of the opportunity areas. We try to plan ahead and work with the neighborhood areas to identify ways we can do an expansion so that it meets our needs and also benefits the needs of the community.”

Vision:

Like most committee members, Burkey has certain hopes and expectations for the North Omaha Development Project (NODP). There is a great deal of redevelopment and revitalization going on in other parts of Omaha. “I think what we would anticipate, and I certainly hope we will see, is the revitalization spread into North Omaha so that the North Omaha community also participates in the benefits.”

There is a very real sense of expectancy in the atmosphere surrounding this project. “There have been a lot of studies in the past,” Burkey said. “But this one feels different. There’s a broad base of commitment. People, I think, understand the importance of really making things happen this time.” So he’s encouraged by those differences and fully expects it to translate into solid results.

One Community:

In order to realize a healthy, vibrant community throughout the Omaha metro area, we need all parts to be healthy and participating in progressive redevelopment efforts. “It's bad for the community as a whole,” he said, “when there is a lack of activity in a certain area.”

Disparity:

“Why” there is the economic gap is a little more difficult for Burkey to resolve. “Frankly, I think a lot of it is perception and that's a hard thing to change.”

In the past, individuals may have felt their energies were better directed elsewhere. “But we've seen a lot of the rest of the areas in Omaha take off; I think there's certainly the opportunity and a way to make it happen on the north side.”

Collaboration:

The broad base of support underlying this project includes active involvement from community-based organizations as well as corporate Omaha – both of which are needed to increase chances for success. “There seems to be more in-depth involvement than there has been in the past,” Burkey said. “And I think the approach is different this time.

We've been trying, along the way, to make sure that we’re getting input at community meetings,” (clearly an integral component).

“I think one of the things that has doomed past efforts is well-intentioned groups, and maybe even ourselves in some cases, going in and saying ‘here's what we're going to do to help you,’ rather than asking ‘what can we do together?’ I see that as a kind of fundamental change in how we’re approaching this.”

Grassroots:

One of the challenges of the NODP is the absolute necessity for community involvement. “It won’t be successful if it's viewed as an effort of just a handful of folks trying to make it happen. It's got to be broad-based. And frankly, I think people are right in their skepticism,” Burkey said. “They’ve seen lots of studies. They have probably heard lots of promises in the past about how things will improve.”

So the real challenge lies in convincing the critical mass to invest at the grass-roots level. That is accomplished, Burkey says in part by having community-wide meetings (like the one held on July 19), gathering input, exposing ideas, getting people excited about how things can happen. Then it means giving people freedom to think outside of the proverbial box about how they can best engage and participate in shaping the future of their community. “There has to be a climate and an open door for people to be able to do that.”

Education:

Not surprisingly, Burkey recommends a comprehensive top-to-bottom educational approach. “Obviously each of us has to do what makes sense for our organizations, but we need to bring in educational institutions at all levels. “Everyone will have to guard against getting outside of their mission.” He stressed the importance of sticking with specific areas of expertise, then within that framework, finding ways to collaborate and leverage individual strengths into something better for all concerned.

“For us, a lot of it will be building on what Metropolitan Community College and Omaha Public Schools are doing,” he added. “We need to identify ways for people to think farther ahead – to see what opportunities are really out there for them if they commit themselves to education.” That process begins at an early age and progresses into practical degrees of learning.

Safe Haven:

According to Burkey and others, events that may be somewhat isolated get extrapolated and sensationalized. “People kind of paint the whole area with the same brush. That's a big challenge, in terms of what we do to move forward.” A unique marketing campaign on the part of the study group, beyond the initial release of study, may help change that image.

“Frankly, I think the people who haven't been through the area might have a stereotype of what the area is. We have people come to campus who've been away for awhile. We take them on a tour of the general area and they are often pleasantly surprised at what they see in places like Concord Square with all the new housing that has been developed,” he said. “To get the perceptions turned around, people need to go into the neighborhood to see what's there.” It's not about what you see on the 10 o'clock news, Burkey said. It's about the people who are there and the activities that are available and the resources in the area.

Facilitating a new evaluation of Omaha’s near north side by the general population can feel like a monumental task. “People living in Omaha just don't know North Omaha very well.” They hear a few negative things and assume that conditions are not safe for them to venture into that area. “And while they may be asking the valid question of ‘What's there for me to do?’, the idea is to provide some destination-type activities that will draw people in and give them some positive first-hand exposure.”

It's really the right time for something to happen – a sentiment that is becoming more and more prevalent. “We've got the kind of backing that we've not had before and quite frankly, there's a lot riding on this,”

Burkey admits. “If we can’t get this done this time around, it will be a long time before anyone tries again.”

Burkey recognizes a new level of commitment from a lot of parties. “And that's going to be good for the whole city, not just North Omaha.”

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