



Everything Michigan

New dorm's impact generating worry

Merchants happy, but nearby neighbors are leery

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The vision in the eyes of University of Michigan planners is of a new "gateway" to campus, a large seven-story building combining academic space, modern living quarters for at least 500 students and a gleaming 24-hour dining hall.

While a new-style residence hall planned for the middle of

U-M campus might not draw much reaction from the Ann Arbor community, this proposal is generating a significant buzz among downtown business owners and city officials. That's because its location, at the corner of State and Huron streets, will be at the far northwest corner of the main campus, right on the line dividing campus from community.

The 500 students living in the new building will be much closer than other dorm residents to downtown merchants and a neighborhood of modest homes across Huron Street. Even before an architect has put pencil to paper, just the idea of having so many students living at that corner is prompting talk that the area's traffic and pedestrian flow is in for a significant change.

To merchants, the influx of students mean ringing cash registers. To other development and planning officials, the project encourages greater residential density in the downtown, which is seen as a step to maintaining the health of the city's core.

"I'm all for it," said Gary Clark, manager of the upscale Van Boven clothing store, a longtime presence at 326 S. State St. "If there's 500 students, there's 500 potential customers, and 1,000 parents."

Some city residents who live nearby are taking a more cautious view, primarily because U-M officials said initially that they have not designed parking into the dorm plan. Worried about a deluge of cars left on their streets from the building's students, neighbors already plan to petition the city for resident-only parking restrictions.

"One shouldn't jump to the conclusion that it is all going to be that bad, but it could be," said Ray Detter, vice president of the Old Fourth Ward Association, a neighborhood group, and chairman of the citizens advisory council of the Downtown Development Authority. In addition to parking, he's concerned that more chain stores catering to students will open in the retail area.

Regardless of the pros and cons of having so many students living at Huron and State, it seems certain that the new campus gateway building will create a much busier climate in that area than the existing Frieze Building. That building, the former Ann Arbor High School, is a rundown, nearly century-old facility containing classrooms and offices for parts of several departments. It will be demolished, except for an attached Carnegie Library that faces Huron Street.

U-M has not started construction on a new residence hall since 1967, while its peers have added new buildings and modernized older dorms. Several sites were studied over the years for a new dorm, but Frieze only came into the mix more recently. Administrators say U-M President Mary Sue Coleman, starting her third year at the helm, championed the idea.

U-M officials said the Frieze site has a lot going for it, even though it was destined to - and did -

run into immediate opposition from historic preservationists and alumni of the former Ann Arbor High School. The reunion committee of the Class of 1955, the last to graduate from the high school, for example, recently sent a letter to U-M regents, asking for a portion of the old school to be preserved. The university says it's too expensive to save it. It had to do something with the building; it is crumbling and in serious disrepair.

The site is also valuable on a campus with little open space left. The Frieze site is big enough to suit Coleman's desire to try an innovative design that combines a large residence hall with academic space, which could include classrooms, faculty offices and performance spaces.

In surveys, students said they preferred to live on Central Campus.

"The notion of involving student residential life more with academic life, I think, makes an awful lot of sense," said Denise Scott Brown, one of the principals in the Philadelphia planning firm of Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates. Scott Brown and her husband, Robert Venturi, combed the U-M campus for several years during the tenure of Coleman's predecessor Lee Bollinger as they put together a campus master plan.

Even though the firm wasn't asked to come up with a new use for the Frieze Building, Scott Brown said, she recognized the site's importance. It's appropriate, she said, that the site be used for such a major project. She said her firm just finished a study on connecting student residential and academic life for Brown University.

While she personally likes the architectural details of the older portion of the Frieze Building, she said, there are other structures on campus that should be preserved ahead of Frieze. "You can't save everything," she said, "and still have an ongoing university."

Ann Arbor planners and development officials seem enthusiastic about the U-M plan.

Susan Pollay, executive director of the Downtown Development Authority, is already thinking ahead to the summer lull when students leave town between the spring and fall terms.

"One of the things I was asking about was how to keep that building active 12 months a year," Pollay said. "In a campus area where the town and gown are intertwined, there is a significant change when classes are let out in May. It's an interesting dynamic for the businesses in the summer months; it's a time to cover your bills."

Pollay asked whether the building could be used for conferences or an elder hostel in the summer. Others are suggesting retail space on the first floor facing State Street.

Roger Hewitt, the owner of Red Hawk and Zanzibar, two restaurants just a block or two down State Street from the new dorm, said the project injects more life in the downtown area and will encourage private residential development aimed at an older crowd.

"I think it's great that the university is putting more downtown residential in this area, because I think it helps re-establish this as an urban residential area," he said.

Jim Kearns, president of the State Street Association, also favors greater residential density downtown. "It's a choice spot for (students) to live and I think it might set up a kind of affinity, if they live there, for this area," he said. "So there might be a possibility in later years that they might look to come live downtown."

But concerns over parking loom large in the minds of some of the neighbors, who will ask the city for resident-only parking restrictions. James Kosteva, U-M's director of community relations, said residence halls elsewhere in the city have not affected parking in other neighborhoods.

"I would not expect the Old Fourth Ward to be impacted or inundated by any vehicles from students who would live in the proposed dormitory," Kosteva said.

But the neighbors and city officials aren't buying those assertions. U-M does not build parking for its resident halls. While students are discouraged from bringing cars to campus - freshmen and sophomores can't get parking passes - some upperclassmen do have cars. U-M can't say how many, however