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Campus Partners and The Ohio State University: Transforming a Failing Commercial District

David Dixon

The Ohio State University (OSU) is a public university with growing national stature as a center of learning and research. Located about two miles north of downtown Columbus, OSU became increasingly convinced during the 1990s that it needed to address disinvestment in surrounding neighborhoods, both to protect its ability to attract students, faculty and staff and to fulfill its historic mission of public service as a land-grant institution.

The university's growing commitment to civic engagement is no accident. It is the largest employer in Columbus. Its campus accommodates a combined student, faculty and staff population of almost 50,000 (greater than the city's downtown workforce).

The most significant aspect of the university's commitment to date is an ongoing engagement with the City of Columbus, local business and political leaders, and neighborhood groups to revitalize nearby sections of High Street. The proudest symbol of this engagement so far is the 500,000-sq.ft. mixed-use South Campus Gateway, now under construction.

Planning Context

OSU is located at the center of a university district bisected by High Street, the city's historic "Main Street" and primary artery. High Street defines the eastern edge of the campus, and across it lies a highly diverse mix of shops, bars, entertainment venues, and food businesses. The university district itself extends along High Street roughly a mile north and south of the campus.

OSU saw the neighborhoods around its campus change dramatically in the years following World War II. Middle-class families moved to the suburbs, and the businesses and services that those families had supported largely followed. Soon after, the university consciously began to close itself off from the street and adjacent neighborhoods. Most symbolic and devastating, it closed 15th Street, traditionally the front door to the campus, and located a new performing-arts center so as to block visual connection between the campus, High Street, and the university district beyond.

Over these years a social disconnect also began to emerge between the university and nearby, formerly closely associated residential districts. By the mid-1990s more than 60 percent of undergraduate and graduate students lived outside the university district. Meanwhile, new residents of the area were increasingly low-income — predominantly people of color — who replaced what had been a far more racially and economically mixed population.

Concerned that its downtown was losing jobs and tax revenue to increasingly ambitious office parks in its



northern suburbs, the city exacerbated this gulf when it converted High Street into an arterial to enhance accessibility. Arterial status meant removing curbside parking and closing streets that connected residential neighborhoods to High Street.



Then, as disposable income in the area declined and suburban competition exploded, smaller retailers moved out and strip retail began to replace traditional pedestrian-friendly outlets north and south of the campus. Crime also became a concern, further accelerating the departure of students and long-time residents.

Rendering of the South Gateway rendering. Image courtesy of Elkus/Manfredi Architects.

Forming Campus Partners

In 1992 OSU's President, Gordon Gee, took the position that the university and the city should launch a partnership to "stem the tide of neglect" across the university district. Gee proposed that the university should take the lead in planning and funding, and he appointed neighborhood and city representatives as well as members of the university community to a task force to shape a comprehensive revitalization strategy.

The task force considered a wide range of options, from direct university participation in revitalization to creation of a for-profit entity independent of the university. But it eventually recommended formation of a group to be known as Campus Partners for Community Urban Redevelopment under an Ohio statute that confers on "community redevelopment corporations" a wide range of public powers — most notably the ability to carry out eminent-domain takings. The task force further determined that the university would provide essentially all funding and that it would appoint a majority of the board; the other members would be city and community representatives.

According to the task force, there were many arguments for establishing Campus Partners.

- Revitalization should be led by an entity with a clearly defined mission and full-time staff. Flexibility and effectiveness in undertaking planning and real estate development would also be key, and the university could not provide that expertise.
- A clear source of authority was needed separate from the university's own collegial decision-making process.
- Distance from the university structure would be important, both to shield OSU from potential controversy and to inspire community acceptance.
- Despite the need for distance, it would be equally important to take advantage of the university's relationships with alumni, who constituted much of the political, business and civic leadership in Columbus and central Ohio. A university connection would also convey instant credibility and leverage with the city and with major agencies such as the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.
- Finally, the new entity would need to live up to private-sector expectations by playing the dual role of the redevelopment authority (assembling land and handling relocation, demolition and environmental cleanup) and the source of "patient capital" (taking early risks related to planning and market studies, land purchases, etc.).

Incorporated in January 1995, Campus Partners was charged with developing a comprehensive neighborhood revitalization plan and an implementation program for

the university district. To this effort, OSU committed \$3 million in initial operating funds. This was followed by a \$25 million investment from the university endowment for direct real estate investment, including site assembly.

Campus Partners' Early Steps... and Missteps

Campus Partners almost immediately selected a consultant to prepare an encyclopedic compendium of neighborhood revitalization programs and strategies. But controversy soon developed when Campus Partners and its planners were accused of trying to define the future of the university district for its residents, rather than with them.

When it became clear it was making enemies faster than friends, Campus Partners realized it had to change course, learn more about other key players, and develop working partnerships with residents, business owners, the City of Columbus, and local property owners and developers. In particular, local groups did not necessarily give high priority to the kinds of university-oriented businesses that Campus Partners' initial leadership envisioned. Instead, they were more concerned with enhancing neighborhood services and retail establishments, preserving historic structures, preventing university expansion into their neighborhoods, and addressing local political issues.

The city's planning professionals, meanwhile, recognized that they needed to inject public-sector concerns into the planning process, including economic development and job creation, district design guidelines comparable to those developed in other neighborhoods, and troubleshooting to prevent political problems. Finally, housing developers, while initially enthusiastic, grew concerned about competition from new development, possible eminent-domain takings, and access to potential development activities. The perceived lack of a community-based planning process brought the project to a halt by the end of 1996.

In early 1997 Campus Partners' first president resigned and was replaced by Terry Foegler, who had planning and

development experience in both the public and private sectors. Foegler immediately made two critical decisions: to lead with more community-based planning strategy, and to let decisions reflect that broader involvement; and to step back from a district-wide approach and proceed with a series of sequential projects that could be more readily backed by nonuniversity stakeholders.

Reaching Out Anew to the Community

Foegler decided to start by focusing on decline along High Street, and Campus Partners hired Goody, Clancy & Associates to create a vision and strategy for its revitalization.

The new outreach effort began by creating an Advisory Steering Committee chaired by the executive director of the University Community Business Association. The committee included representatives from neighborhood organizations, the city, a variety of university offices, property owners, local businesses and developers, and OSU students.

To resolve the goals of such different stakeholders into a single vision and plan, participants were urged to express their concerns early on. The consultants then organized a two-month education period to explore the range of viewpoints raised by committee members. The goal was not to create a perfect vision and strategic plan, but to arrive at positions that maximized benefits and minimized costs from a variety of perspectives.

As the process reached its midpoint, committee members began to articulate a series of shared perspectives that eventually provided a foundation upon which to build a plan.

Creating a Plan

Once the elements of such a common vision were in place, Goody Clancy began to translate them into a set of urban design principles.

The new High Street would need to be viewed as a common ground, offering a mix of uses and public spaces

Over the years the foursquare, though rarely distinguished, brick buildings that line the street have suffered more from botched attempts at modernization than outright neglect. Their slapped-on facades, out-of-date neon signs, unused upper floors all testify in

one way or another to their owners' doomed efforts to stem the drift of businesses to the suburbs in the 1950s and 1960s where life was newer and parking easier.

The character of the neighborhood is defined more particularly by a quiet and even decorous distance from mainstream culture, so that in local restaurants like Hound Dog Pizza and Whole World Natural Foods you can see old counterculture types and Gen-Xers at neighbor-

to draw on the full spectrum of the community. It would need to be enjoyable as a walkable street. It would need to provide a setting for diverse economic opportunities, including retail and entertainment uses and a wide array of housing options. It would need to be linked to adjacent neighborhoods by reopened streets. Both traditional and cutting-edge design would need to be welcome, reusing and rehabilitating High Street's notable older buildings and creating design guidelines for new development. Finally, High Street would need to be enlivened by a distinctive public realm.

Beginning south of the campus and extending to its northern edge, these design goals led to several significant development recommendations.

- Encouraging a series of new mixed-use developments in the area directly south of the university district, which could build on that area's already strong retail and housing markets.
- Redeveloping the pedestrian-hostile Kroger site with housing and a new street-fronting 60,000 sq.ft. store.
- Refashioning an overcrowded branch library into an important civic building.
- Constructing South Campus Gateway Center, a mixed-use regional destination that might support a wide range of retail and entertainment uses, as well as housing.
- Redeveloping several larger sites from single-story retail to mixed-use, with housing above and retail below.
- Re-creating the historic 15th Street gateway between the campus and the community through mixed-use development and a new University Square public space.
- Transforming several fast-food restaurants into more pedestrian-oriented businesses, and replacing several fast-food restaurants and a convenience store at the north end of the district with a mixed-use development.

Overall, the consultants identified demand for roughly one million sq.ft. of new space in existing and new buildings along a two-mile stretch of High Street.

In addressing this demand, one key strategy component was forming a parking authority through a partnership between the city, the university, and local property owners. The authority would be charged with building structured parking, faced with housing, along public streets.

The plan also called for establishing a special-improvement district to keep High Street "clean and safe." It called for the preparation of development and design guidelines that might protect the district's lively, often historic character. And it called for facade- and building-improvement incentives funded by the city, the university, and private sources, and more than \$5 million in streetscape improvements by the city to enhance the public realm.

Finally, it initiated several strategic redevelopment projects, including the regional mixed-use South Campus Gateway "destination," with a 1,100-car parking structure.

Next Steps

At this writing, working with Goody Clancy, the university and the city have approved the "Plan for High Street: Creating a 21st-Century Main Street" and "Design Guidelines for High Street"; the South Campus Gateway Center is midway through construction; and Campus Partners has initiated a series of additional redevelopment projects along High Street. In this effort Goody Clancy worked with an interdisciplinary consultant team, including the Gibbs Planning Group, which was particularly effective in developing a mixed-use strategy that ensured that new development would include a lively mix of retail, and that the South Campus Gateway Center would be oriented along High Street, avoiding internal atriums. Most recently, Campus Partners has also asked Goody Clancy to work with the city and the residents of nearby Weinland Park to develop a plan to transform that area. Without displacing current residents, its hopes is to transform it from one of the city's lowest-income neighborhoods into a mixed-income community.

ing tables. Two generations, distant enough to be parents and children, coexist with a certain tolerance and a shared fondness for fetish objects like the retro-look Volkswagen Beetle. If I were to learn, sitting among these tables, that some Weathermen or other 1960s radicals had gone under-

ground in this neighborhood with false identities, I would not be surprised.... Hound Dog gently teases the neighborhood style by proclaiming "Pizza for the People" and by delivering in a red Volkswagen with a toy rocket, surmounted by a plastic hound dog, on its roof.

From Nick Howe, "Writing Home; High Street," in *Across an Inland Sea: Writings on Place from Buffalo to Berlin* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 167-68, 179.