PICTURE THIS: A FRESH VISION FOR UL

A rendering of a proposed business and entertainment development is seen against the field between the LITE Center and Cajun Field. LESLIE WESTBROOK, THE ADVERTISER

Condos, townhouses, restaurants, an entertainment district and more could be just around the corner — literally.

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Imagine that the grassy fields across Congress Street from the Cajundome and Cajun Field held an entertainment district with condominiums, restaurants, shops and a performing arts center. Picture that space having a university-meets-River-Ranch feel and look to it. It's not as foreign or as far away as you might think.

Three companies have submitted concept designs for developing the Congress Street property owned by the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. It's a part of the UL Master Plan that university administration wants to push ahead, especially because the development could be a way to bring more money into the university at a time when state funding has been stripped away.

"The genesis of this plan was based on the university doing two things," said Steve Oubre, whose architecture firm is heading up the project. "Creating a state-of-the-art research component that would provide a broader outreach to the community, and the second one was to create some value with the university property to allow the university to have an income stream above and beyond budget."

First on the University Commons project would be to expand the Cajundome Convention Center and build a 300-room Convention Center hotel. The next portion could include a variety of mixed-used spaces aimed especially at young professionals but also active retirees.

Oubre expects the development to include 600-700 living spaces divided into family detached houses. The area would also include restaurants, shops and office space.

"This complements downtown, the university, the Oil Center," Oubre said. "And once you get this critical mass, you're beginning to create a community core, a high-density core that feeds upon itself. And the lifestyle is very attractive to a young population and a retiring population."

Other parts of the develop-

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ment could also include a new performing arts center to complement the Cajundome and Ragin' Cajun sports venues in the corridor.

The University Commons development is something that the Hilton Garden Inn’s general manager thinks will create more activity and, in turn, more business for the hotel.

“The more they develop an area that is not just event-centric makes it better for us,” Bart Ferrell said. “If there is something going on at Cajun Field or the Cajundome or Convention Center, our business is great. But during off times when those facilities aren’t being used, not so much.”

Oubre is planning to hold a party by the end of the summer to drum up interest in the University Commons project.

“Within the next 1 1/2 to two years, we could have infrastructure in place,” Oubre said. “We’ve already got interest in the research space, so that’s good.”

Part of that interest is from the information technology company CGI, which will anchor the corner property at Cajundome Boulevard and Devalcourt Street across from the Louisiana Immersive Technologies Enterprise building.

The University Commons development could bring in new potential for businesses and even keep recent UL alumni from leaving Lafayette.

“Increasingly, young professionals and really professional talent of all ages has a great deal of choice in where they locate,” said Jason El Koubi, president and CEO of the Greater Lafayette Chamber of Commerce.

“And we need to have the kind of environment and urban communities to compete for those kinds of individuals.”

The University Commons property is composed of 250 acres, with 195.5 acres of the property subject to private investment. Some of the 250 acres is already developed by the university, including the land that currently includes the Cajundome and Bourgeois Hall.

Oubre is not identifying the companies that responded to Architects Southwest’s request for interest and qualification on the University Commons project until the development team meets.

About one dozen companies initially showed interest in submitting plans for the corridor, so Oubre is also reaching out to some of the other companies who showed interest to find out why they didn’t submit final proposals for the project.

The project could be developed and managed by one company, or the university and architecture firm could use different companies to develop different portions of the project.

UL President E. Joseph Saviose hopes to stick with one company who can develop a master plan for the property.

“One of our primary motivations is revenue source,” Saviose said. “So the less risk we take, the less revenue we have.”