

Land-use planning for the masses

Design center allows public to try hand at shaping key corridor

BY LAURA YUEN

Pioneer Press

On St. Paul's University Avenue, you can order Cambodian noodles, buy a secondhand mannequin and replace the muffler on your old Buick.

And starting today, you can create your own streetscape.

A do-it-yourself urban design center offering equipment, software and technical expertise to the public will open today at 1956 W. University Ave.

The storefront office, called U-Plan Community Planning Studio, is a land-use wonk's dream, but it is already generating some grass-roots interest.

With big-box retailers sniffing around and a light-rail line on the horizon for University Avenue, supporters say it gives the little guy a new weapon in the ongoing battle to reshape the Central Corridor.

In the center's sparse storefront office, interested groups can equip themselves with GIS mapping software, design tools and mega-size printers designed to help them create their own development blueprints along the avenue.

For a district council or neighborhood group engaged in a development issue, those resources usually aren't easy to come by, said Kristen Kidder, executive director of the Thomas-Dale/District 7 Planning Council.

"At the neighborhood level, we're to some degree playing catch-up," said Kidder, who also is a member of the new center's management team. "We're not on the cutting edge. This provides us the ability to be a little closer to that cutting edge."

The scramble for every developable inch on University Avenue already has begun. Community activists and design enthusiasts already have lost key battles over recent bricks-and-mortar projects, including a CVS, Aldi discount grocery and Wal-Mart.

Opponents of those developments contend they discourage pedestrians and transit riders and have no place on the future home of light rail. Another big fight, at Interstate 94 and Snelling Avenue, could soon erupt over a proposed Home Depot and Best Buy.

To get the design center going, community planning group University United received \$125,000 from the Minneapolis Foundation, which University United says will go toward its goal of operating the U-Plan studio for at least four days a week over the next two years. All services are free, at least in the initial stages.

Participants will be able to use the mapping software while analyzing area demographics, traffic counts, property values and other characteristics along the Central Corridor, said staffer Julia Burman, who has applied some of those tools through her work at the Northeast Community Development Corp. in Minneapolis. Seeing that kind of data plotted on a map allows folks to better grasp the bigger picture of their communities, Burman said.

District councils that use the center also might find it easier to visualize the kind of development they want to see, with the use of software that can create images of buildings of various heights and sizes in relation to the existing streetscape.

Some of the community councils have expressed interest in using the center as they rethink uses for the Unidale Mall site as well as an upcoming redevelopment project on North Snelling Avenue. Two private property owners also have signed up to use the studio, said University United's Brian McMahon.

McMahon has enlisted GIS support from students at Macalester College, the University of Minnesota and the University of St. Thomas.

Starting next spring, architects with the American Institute of Architects-Minnesota will share their expertise at the studio at workshops designed to envision new development along the avenue by individual blocks. Tim Griffin, of the St. Paul on the Mississippi Design Center, will oversee the program.

Laura Yuen can be reached at lyuen@pioneerpress.com or 651-228-5498.

If you go

The U-Plan Community Planning Studio will host an open house from noon to 7 p.m. today, with a demonstration beginning at 4:30 p.m. Visit www.universityunited.com or call 651-641-0293 for more information.