

‘Play Together’

Medical Center anchors come together for redevelopment plan

By Madeline Faber

The Memphis Medical Center is a hotbed of nationally renowned research and health care, but after dark the area might as well be dead.

Despite a workforce of 16,000 and a student base of 8,000, there are limited residential facilities and only a handful of nearby restaurants. But that’s all poised to change thanks to a partnership with an outside consulting group.

In an unprecedented move, the Medical Center’s nine anchor institutions have come together to direct their \$2.7 billion combined operating budget and other massive resources toward developing the district.

“The biggest hurdle has been overcome,” said [Ken Brown](#), executive vice chancellor and chief of operations with the University of Tennessee Health Sciences Center. “There’s finally somebody in the room to say, ‘Guys, you really should play together.’”

UTHSC started talking about big picture strategy in May 2014 along with Baptist College of Health Sciences, Le Bonheur Children’s Hospital, Memphis Bioworks Foundation, Methodist University Hospital, Regional One Health, Southern College of Optometry, Southwest Tennessee Community College, and St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital/ALSAC.

The Hyde Family Foundations, one of the major stakeholders in the medical district, first introduced Memphis’ 2.5-square-mile challenge to U3 Advisors, a Philadelphia-based consulting group that specializes in institutional strategy. U3 has enlivened districts in midtown Detroit and the University of Pennsylvania.

According to U3 team member Tommy Pacello, who was previously with the Mayor’s Innovation Delivery Team in Memphis, the area is better off than previous cases in terms of having a solid street network, the centrally located Health Sciences Park, good building stock and sidewalk-facing entrances.

“All the things a typical consultant would come in and say to do, the area’s already got it. The big pieces are already there,” he said.

U3 is on board to uncover the opportunities and challenges in the area and develop a response that works with the institutions’ existing assets. Funding structures for the multi-year project



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(Daily News/Andrew J. Breig)

could include public/private partnerships, incentives to attract private investment and institution-sponsored development.

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The Medical Center has been on the city’s radar for years, and Pacello said that U3’s work is compatible with the accomplishments made by Livable Memphis and the I-Team.

The plan also is exploring ideas put forth in the 2014 study done by the Urban Land Institute’s [Daniel Rose Center](#) for Public Leadership in Land Use. During the yearlong fellowship, top urban planners worked to turn the Memphis Medical Center into a booming innovation

district extending into the Edge District.

“Like the work Livable Memphis and I-Team have been doing, we’re trying to get these places back on people’s mental map,” Pacello said.

In the 1970s, 36,000 people lived in the medical district; now that number is down to less than 15,000. By fostering the livability of the district, the institutions can curb the sprawling 230 acres of commercial and institutional parking and use that land for something that encourages a sense of place.

Mixed-use residential developments, emphasizing the district as a cohesive brand and cleaning up public spaces, are all part of the ideal vision.

The Southern College of Optometry has the largest percentage of students living in the Memphis Medical Center, and interim president Lewis Reich is especially concerned with making sure that the students are drawn to the area for continued work and housing opportunities.

Reich is on board with U3’s suggestion to imagine Madison Avenue as a spine that connects the medical district with development in Overton Square and Downtown.

“What we need is a transformation to a safe, attractive area of the medical center that would bring people in rather than feel like we’re an isolated island,” he said.

He also sees the need for an infrastructure overhaul in addition to mixed-use development. He’s hoping for public transportation in a small-range model like Midtown’s Ride the Roo or the University of Memphis’ Blue Line.

“If there were food trucks at UTHSC, I can’t physically tell my students to walk a mile across 240, and I don’t want them to drive because that would just contribute to the parking situation, but if there were public transportation options that were accessible, safe and affordable that would be a great thing and it would help to connect the whole area,” he said.

As U3 gets the gears turning for the development and implementation phase, every option is on the table.

“I don’t think any of the institutions that play a part in this collective thinking are so involved in their own individual stake that they’d be prepared to achieve success to the detriment of the

other institutions,” Brown said. “It’s really all boats rising.”