

UW's gaze into future instructive

- Wisconsin State Journal editorial
- Sep 11, 2016
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- Michael Forster Rothbart, UW Madison

Two students study on Bascom Hill in front of Bascom Hall and the "W" crest banners, with Van Hise Hall and Carillon Tower in the background, during spring.

A developer wanted to put up a large apartment building in the 1200 block of Spring Street — right where UW-Madison plans to expand.

So you'd expect the proposal to trigger a fight.

But it didn't.

UW officials told the developer of the Humbucker Apartments to go ahead with his plans when he approached the university with the idea several years ago. The university, according to its long-range campus plan, doesn't think it will need the land for decades. And at that point, the apartments will be worn, outdated and ready for replacement — with UW looking to buy the site.

UW-Madison plans to be educating college students a century from now. So the construction and life of an apartment building is, relatively speaking, a short period of time.

“Are we going to need it in the near future? No,” said Gary Brown, UW’s director of campus planning. “We’ll probably need it at some point in time. Until then, go ahead and build a building there.”

That’s the kind of long-range planning UW-Madison does once every decade. It’s a smart, thorough and open process that the public can get involved with this week. UW campus planners will host their last big public open house Tuesday on the 2015 campus master plan before submitting it to the city for approval.

The plan envisions several 1960s-era buildings coming down, including Van Hise, the tallest tower on campus. Unlike Chamberlin, Sterling and other halls built more than a century ago, Van Hise wasn’t made to last. It’s ugly, worn and costly to maintain, so eventually demolishing it makes sense. The master plan envisions the site becoming a grassy mall.

The plan also foresees filling surface parking lots with buildings. Yet net parking on campus will increase to better accommodate visitors. That’s true even though the number of bicycle stalls on campus now exceeds those for motor vehicles.

Rapid buses could cruise down a reconfigured University Avenue in the future, and a small train could quickly move students and staff between and beyond stops at the Kohl Center, Union South and University Hospital. An inter-city bus hub could locate near the campus end of State Street.

With 4 miles of shoreline, UW wants to be a good steward of Lake Mendota. More than two dozen pipes pour stormwater into the lake. That runoff needs better filtration of pollution, which is part of the master plan.

UW hopes to buy more wind energy to power its buildings in the future. It also wants to create “green streets” around campus that move water to green spaces to help beautify campus and reduce runoff.

The politicians may have a hard time thinking past the next election. Nonetheless, every public institution in Wisconsin should be planning far beyond that.

UW-Madison’s campus master plan is a strong example of preparing a key state institution for a bright future.