

Universities a Big Part of Urban Renewal

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DETROIT -- When people around here talk about "Midtown," the discussion generally concerns new condos, small businesses and lifestyle.

Not long ago, the neighborhood separating Wayne State University's campus from downtown mostly contained ramshackle buildings and rat-infested alleys and was notorious for its drug houses and prostitutes.

"We use the euphemism today and call it Midtown, but it was the Cass Corridor and everyone knew what the Cass Corridor was," Wayne State President Irvin Reid said.

When Reid arrived in 1997, he set about transforming the reputation of the faded community bordering the 200-acre urban campus, with Cass Avenue as its main thoroughfare.

As developers added upscale condos and townhouses costing up to \$600,000 per unit, the university also went to work.

Wayne State has spent more than \$1 billion in the past decade for on- and off-campus housing and building projects.

"More people are realizing the action is in Midtown Detroit," Reid said. "As we fulfill our strategic mission to revitalize Detroit, we have become part of the growing rhythm of this diverse neighborhood."

Anchored by the university and a cultural district that includes the Detroit Institute of Arts, Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History and Orchestra Hall _ home of the Detroit Symphony _ Midtown has become a destination for tourists and residents alike.

More than 20 housing developments have been built. A \$36 million apartment development is going up on university-owned land.

"Universities can't just pick up and move like corporations," said Roland Anglin,

executive director for the Initiative for Regional and Community Transformation at New Jersey's Rutgers University. "They really do have a stock investment in buildings and history in those communities."

Many urban schools are doing more outside the classroom to revitalize their neighborhoods and improve students' experiences on and off campus.

An early effort was in 1950s Chicago. Federal funds, private investment and \$29 million from the University of Chicago were used to demolish old buildings and clear tracts of land to transform Hyde Park into a vibrant college community.

The University of Cincinnati is a partner in various redevelopment programs expected to lead to \$500 million in new construction near the campus.

And Rutgers donated parking lots to the city of Camden to help create market-rate row houses in one neighborhood. Each of the 18 townhouses being built has been sold, university spokesman Mike Seganic said.

Rutgers also is seeking proposals from developers to convert a former law school building on its Newark campus into student housing or a hotel. It's part of the university's plan to create an "academic village," a phrase more schools are using to describe their relationships with the community.

Schools have to be proactive in removing blight and making sure the area around campus is attractive and safe, Reid said.

"You have to have the foresight to know there is an opportunity for acquiring the land," he said. "You can't just grab land ... for no purpose at all."

General Motors Corp. donated a building just north of campus to Wayne State for a technology center.

Wayne State is promoting new housing in the area to more than 8,200 faculty and staff and nearly 31,000 students. In return, the companies are offering incentives ranging from a year without mortgage payments to thousands of dollars in upgrades to free parking spaces.

Add small, affordable eateries, a coffeehouse, bookstore and hair salon, and the campus becomes more of an attraction for people living in and visiting Midtown.

"It's critically important to have new retail and new restaurants," said Susan Mosey, president of the University Cultural Center Association. "It's another reason for students to want to live in the dorm or in apartments."

The same is proving true near the University of Cincinnati.

University Park and Stratford Village are helping transform neighborhoods that Tony Brown, chief executive of a nonprofit consortium working with the school on the projects, calls "slum-like."

"The university discovered that if students were coming to look at the campus, the parents were saying, 'Where is my child going to live?'" Brown said.

For an urban university to be a part of the community, it has to reach out and not become an island, Reid said.

"This does not happen in one day, one year or, for that matter, in 10 years," he said. "It takes time."

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