

U of S residence plan approved

College Quarter facility first phase of university's 'vibrant community'

BY JANET FRENCH, THE STARPHOENIX DECEMBER 22, 2009

Work has begun on the first new student residence to go up on the University of Saskatchewan campus in 30 years.

College Quarter undergraduate residence -- Phase I is the first piece of a massive, multi-decade development plan for a 145-acre swath of university land at the south end of campus.

Last week, the university's board of governors approved a master plan for College Quarter that will set the tone for the development of an area that is now mostly fields between College Drive and 14th Street and Cumberland and Preston avenues.

"That whole area should look quite different 10 years from now," said Richard Florizone, the university's vice-president of finance and resources.

Information presented to the board of governors says the area should become a "vibrant community" that includes new academic buildings, student residences, sports facilities, shops, cafes, bookstores, small grocery stores, parks, open space, cultural destinations and more, with a focus on pedestrians.

The master plan shows at least one new academic building and numerous new residential buildings, complexes and townhouses.

To begin, Florizone says, the university's priority is new student residences. The U of S has long struggled with a lack of student housing compared to many other Canadian universities. Building more student housing is essential if the U of S wants to be competitive in recruiting students from out of province, he said.

"It's almost a non-starter if you can't offer them housing -- certainly from their parents' viewpoint."

Once destined for a spot farther south on Cumberland, the first residence project is now underway behind the R.J.D. Williams building. Florizone said the grass has been removed and fences and cranes should up early in the new year.

Last year, Florizone had said he'd wanted construction underway earlier in 2009 for an opening date of fall 2010. Now, the \$35-million complex of two-, three- and four-bedroom apartments for 400 students is likely to open in fall 2011.

"It's maybe taken us a while," he said. "We haven't (built a residence) in three decades, but we'll be

much faster on the next one."

The university is in the preliminary design phase for the next residence: An apartment-style graduate student residence that could be nearly as big as the first undergraduate complex, Florizone said. After that, the university wants to get going on a second phase of undergraduate student residences. There's no word yet on where those buildings would go. Including sets of townhouses proposed for the south end of College Quarter, the area could have as many as 2,700 more residential spaces when complete.

Although the university struck a deal with private developer Meridian Development Corp., and received \$15 million from the provincial government to build the first building, Florizone hopes the first new residences will be profitable enough for the university to raise its own money for future residences.

Also according to the plan, the athletic fields now blanketing the area would be moved behind the Saskatoon Field House and south of Griffiths Stadium.

The university is also in talks with the City of Saskatoon about the possibility of building a new ice arena adjoining the city-owned Field House. The U of S has yet to decide whether it will refurbish its aging Rutherford Rink or start from scratch.

What could land on the corner of Cumberland and College -- which Florizone describes as a "premier" location in the city -- is still a question mark.

Two possibilities are a hotel or a fine arts centre, neither of which the university has spent much time investigating. Florizone said he wants to ensure the "right project" goes on that prominent corner.

Another key feature of the master plan is the creation of a "college greenway," which would be a tree-lined pathway extending from north to south throughout the development.

Absent from the plan are any buildings pencilled in on the southeast corner of the land, bordered by Preston and 14th Street. That area is used for plant science experiments.

Although the university has been planning and consulting on College Quarter since 2006, it plans on another year of university and city consulting in 2010 to get feedback and ideas for the master plan. By 2011, the university aims to produce a preliminary infrastructure plan, cost estimates for the entire site and a business plan for financing future buildings.

If all goes according to plan, design of the new graduate residence should be done by the end of 2010 and a second undergraduate residence could be built by 2012.

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