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Uptown Greenville holds meeting on proposed downtown public space

BY GINGER LIVINGSTON
The Daily Reflector

The parking lot at Evans and Fifth streets should be more than a utilitarian space, said several speakers at a Tuesday night meeting discussing the area's future.

Uptown Greenville, which promotes businesses in the downtown area, sponsored a meeting to collect opinions on a proposal to restructure the space at Evans and Fifth streets as a multipurpose public space.

About 25 people attended the meeting in East Carolina University's Willis Building.

"Albi" McLawhorn, chairman of Uptown Greenville's design committee, outlined possible uses of the space before opening the floor to comments. "Currently, I feel like there are very few places you can go to experience our tremendous diversity," McLawhorn said.

The idea of reshaping the parking lot arose in 2006 during public meetings on a plan to redevelop the downtown area and west Greenville. A year later, the Greenville City Council negotiated a deal with Jarvis Memorial United Methodist Church to swap land and close a portion of Washington and Sixth streets. That See UPTOWN, A9
enabled the city to connect Dickinson Avenue directly to Evans Street and gave Jarvis room for expansion. Both the church and the city gained more parking.

The work began earlier this year, and is expected to be completed Oct. 10, said Wes Anderson, Greenville’s public works director.

And that makes it a good time, McLawhorn said last week, to revisit the 2006 plan and use the lot for more than parking.

During his presentation Tuesday night, McLawhorn showed slides of European plazas and downtown spaces in New Bern and Carrboro to demonstrate how public areas can be used.

McLawhorn said the area in question, which is gaining about two-fifths more parking, could incorporate parking, green space, a pavilion structure that could shelter markets and a water feature.

“Do you think you can do these places without losing parking space?” asked Katherine Wetherington, co-owner of Dulcinéa on Washington Street. She said business owners and developers have several large projects in the works for downtown which will bring more people into the area.

“I think a lot of owners down there fear a parking crisis is coming very soon,” she said. “If this is a chance to say what our concerns are, my concern is a loss of parking space.”

Richard King, an architect who has worked on several restoration projects of downtown businesses, said the downtown area’s parking issues need to be addressed.

“I think we need to decide if we want the center of our city to be a parking lot,” he said.

If parking remains in the space, King asked whether the city is willing to bend its parking construction requirements to accommodate the a multipurpose public space.

Myron Casper said he also thought the discussion would focus on making the lot usable green space as opposed to a parking area.

Don Edwards, who owns University Book Exchange on Cotanche Street and has renovated a number of buildings in downtown Greenville, said business people need parking in the area. He said green space could be available by accessing the Humble House at the corner of Fifth and Washington streets.

That building, which is next to the parking lot, has a sizable yard. It is owned by the state of North Carolina and houses a state Historic Preservation office, he said, and could be used a starting point for creating a green space area.

Several people asked about the work being completed and whether it is possible to modify the plans to meet the recommendations being discussed. McLawhorn said the site’s basic layout is set, but that some of the recommend proposals can be fairly easy to incorporate.

“We have to deal with what we have,” said Eric Clark, president of Uptown Greenville. “Our goal, our intent is not one way or the other.”

J.P. Walsh, whose wife, Denise, is Uptown Greenville’s director, said the space needs a bicycle rack and a water feature that is child-friendly.

Gary Fenton, Greenville’s recreation and parks director, said the Greenville Town Common is space that connects with many people in the community which could be better utilized.

“It’s an untapped resource. We have Sunday in the Park down there, but it stands idle a lot,” he said.

Its distance from downtown and the fact that government buildings take up most of the two blocks bordering it create a disconnect he said, and he added that plans for developing public spaces should focus on creating a connection with the Town Common.

Uptown Greenville officials plan a second meeting Oct. 15 involving business people, ECU and city officials to review Tuesday’s comments, said Denise Walsh, Uptown Greenville’s director. The group plans to present its findings during November’s meeting of the city’s Redevelopment Commission.

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John McCain has supported legislation that would enable children of illegal immigrants to attend college, says the campaign of his Democratic opponent, Barack Obama.

The Republican presidential nominee co-sponsored The Dream Act in 2003, 2005 and 2007. The act would allow high school children of illegal immigrants to obtain permanent residency by attending college or serving in the armed forces.

During a visit to North Carolina over the weekend, Obama, an Illinois senator, said he favored allowing the children of illegal immigrants to attend community colleges.

"For us to deny them access to community college, even though they've never lived in Mexico, at least as far as they can tell ... is to deny that this is how we've always built this country up," Obama said in an interview with WUNC during a campaign stop in Greensboro.

The McCain campaign responded by saying it did not support amnesty or benefits but did not specifically address the question of who can attend community colleges.

"The McCain campaign is trying to get away with something here," said Paul Cox, an Obama campaign spokesman. "They're trying to make voters think there is a distinction between the two candidates' positions where there is none."

The issue has been contentious in North Carolina. Last month, the State Board of Community Colleges agreed to spend up to $75,000 to study whether to admit illegal immigrants as students.

There were 112 illegal immigrants among the 300,000 students enrolled in the state community college system last year.
Why doctors still balk at electronic medical records

By Kevin Pho

Despite the fact that we can complete our taxes and perform complex financial transactions digitally over the Internet, medical records have faced an impasse preventing a transition to the digital age. Patient charts are still paper-based in most doctors' offices across the country.

President Bush's goal was for every American to have an electronic medical record by 2014. Both presidential nominees Barack Obama and John McCain's health reform plans include language that modernizes our health information system.

Despite the advantages of computerized records — including reduction of errors, improved preventive care and potential health care cost savings — adoption of the technology remains distressingly low.

The New England Journal of Medicine recently found that only 13% of physicians had made the transition to an electronic record system. The primary reason is financial. Upfront costs — which include purchasing servers, computers and software — can be as high as $36,000 per physician.

Beyond financial costs

In addition, the learning curve for these programs is steep, increasing the amount of time a physician spends per patient.

For their efforts, doctors receive only 11% of the savings from electronic records, with most of the savings going to health insurance companies and the government.

In today's environment of rising office and malpractice costs, the decision for doctors to adopt digital records is fiscally unpalatable. David Brailer, former national health information technology coordinator in the Bush administration, puts it best: "The doctors bear all the costs, and others reap most of the benefit."

Furthermore, today's electronic record systems are riddled with problems. Many programs boil the patient encounter down to a series of "yes" or "no" questions that are then entered into the software. The resulting computer-generated notes are almost devoid of useful clinical information.

Hinder openness

As Harvard physician Jerome Groopman says, encouraging doctors to ask restrictive questions can suppress open-ended dialogue with a patient, "which can be key to making the correct diagnosis and to understanding which treatment best fits a patient's beliefs and needs."

With hundreds of products on the market, few standards exist that would allow them to communicate with one another. Your primary care doctor might use one system, your specialist another and the local hospital a third.

One needs to look at the Department of Veterans Affairs for an optimal model. All of the VA's primary care physicians, specialists and hospital-based doctors across the country use the same electronic record system. It has played a significant role in the reduction of medical errors, optimization of cost efficiency, and attainment of high scores in preventive care measures.

Like other health indices, the U.S. lags other countries in the digitization of medical records. Modernizing our health information technology will be expensive, with estimates in the hundreds of billions of dollars.

Neither presidential nominee proposes enough financial resources to help doctors adopt computerized record systems. Combined with the dysfunction and incompatibility between the current crop of programs, the goal of universal electronic medical records remains elusive.

Kevin Pho is a primary care physician in Nashua, N.H., and blogs at www.kevinmd.com. He also is a member of USA TODAY's board of contributors.