

Introduction

A brief summary of the purpose and scope of the BIG Picture Education Focus Group was presented by Dennis Madsen, Manager of Urban and Long Range Planning. It was noted that the group's focus was primarily on the following issues:

1. How K-12 public school facilities can be linked to and integrated into the community
2. How our local colleges and universities can be socially and physically knitted into the fabric of the city

Review of Issues from Previous Meeting

Mr. Madsen gave a brief summary of the issues discussed at the last meeting including the following:

1. Connectivity: It was noted that the discussion had centered on the need to insure the physical connectivity of new local public schools to their surrounding communities. It was reported that school system representatives who were present at that meeting are currently working on these issues.
2. Engaging Students in City Planning: It was noted that involving students in the planning process was one of the goals of the BIG Picture effort and that we would like to continue to reframe our outreach activities and information to better connect with local youth. Like the adult activities, the overall purpose of these outreach efforts would be to engage in a dialogue about how young people can help shape the future of their community.

K-12 Student Outreach

In an extended discussion of BIG Picture student outreach efforts in Huntsville schools, the following suggestions and comments were shared:

1. Teachers- hold forums to update teachers, particular Social Studies faculty, on city planning issues so that they can share information with students
2. Student Councils- partner with these organizations to promote activities that would foster effective peer to peer interaction
3. Exercises and Surveys- Repackage "dot" exercises from various BIG Picture events using the school's computer and technology resources
4. Civic Challenges- promote activities patterned after the civic challenge program initiated by Randolph School in which students assume roles as city leaders and are asked to develop solutions for various community issues
5. Panoply- develop activities for Panoply's Interactive School days which focus on STEAM initiatives

6. YouTube- create YouTube videos to engage middle and high school students
7. Topics- choose topics, such as transportation, which might more effectively engage youth
8. Tailored Programs- efforts should be tailored to reflect the different needs of various schools and age groups
9. Parent Involvement- consider alternative approaches that encourage parents to engage with their children on these issues
10. Surveys- develop youth oriented surveys
11. Student Led Initiatives- Rather than “teacher-led” activities and projects, encourage student service clubs to take the lead
12. SPACE Program- link BIG Picture initiatives to SPACE, Huntsville City Schools’ gifted education program
13. School Buy-in- Any efforts should be sensitive to the heavy workload of teachers. Specifically, before initiating any activities, planners should secure input from faculty on various issues, including timing, program structure and whether the activities should be curricular or extracurricular in nature.

Town and Gown Issues

Mr. Madsen explained that the term “town and gown” generally refers to the relationship of colleges and universities to their surrounding communities. It was noted that the benefits of joint university and city planning accrue to both students and local citizens and result in an enhanced quality of life for both groups. In discussing this topic the following comments were noted:

1. Huntsville has opportunities at all our local colleges and universities for more effective town and gown planning and interaction.
2. Meridian Street, near the Alabama A&M and Drake campuses, was noted as an area having such potential.
3. Proximity to a university campus can present both opportunities and challenges for neighborhoods as the adjacent university grows and changes.
4. Planning initiatives which promote effective town and gown relationships include:
 - a. Appropriately designed and effectively enforced housing regulations
 - b. Appropriately designed commercial zoning regulations that balance the interests of both student customers and business owners
 - c. Functional pedestrian and bicycle connections between the college and the community
 - d. Shared greenspace
5. Student surveys, perhaps with an online component, could be used to get input on issues important to area college students.

UAH

The following issues specifically related to UAH were discussed:

1. UAH has made a conscious effort to transition away from its traditional model as a commuter oriented school

2. The growth of the university has resulted in the purchase of several houses in adjacent neighborhoods leaving some nearby residents concerned about the future of their communities
3. Interaction and regular dialogue between UAH and surrounding residents would help address neighborhood questions and concerns. It was noted that such a meeting involving UAH and the Rocket View Neighborhood Association is scheduled for November 10, 2014.
4. Jordan Lane represents a good opportunity to create a vibrant student oriented commercial area. Specific ideas for enhancing the area include:
 - a. Installation of a median with landscaping
 - b. Planting trees along the right of way
 - c. Adding sidewalks
 - d. Creating better bicycle connections to UAH; a connection via Saundralane Drive and University Park was noted as a good opportunity for such a link
5. Holmes Avenue is a great opportunity for creating a pedestrian and bicycle connection between UAH and other important activity nodes including Research Park and Downtown.

Calhoun Community College

The following issues related to Calhoun Community College were discussed:

1. The planned relocation of a portion of Wynn Drive will create opportunities to reuse land adjacent to the college which was formerly occupied by surface parking
2. Concern was expressed that the existing Wynn Drive might be closed before the new roadway segment is completed thus creating significant traffic and access issues
3. New facilities and related campus improvements now being planned as a result of the Wynn Drive relocation should incorporate design elements which encourage interaction and connectivity with the adjacent community
4. Students have expressed concern that there are limited restaurant options near campus

Connectivity and Campus Security

Returning to the issue of connectivity and local K-12 facilities, it was noted that recent policy decisions limiting access to public schools after regular school hours seems to run counter to the concept of using them to help foster a sense of community in the surrounding neighborhoods. It was suggested that, rather than creating problems, the presence of parents and other adults on school property in the evenings could actually enhance security. It was also noted that the trend toward installing high security fences may also begin to create a fortress-like perception of public schools and inhibit attempts to incorporate them into the fabric of the community. However, those present recognized that balancing the issues of campus safety and neighborhood quality of life can be challenging and suggested that further discussion with school officials would be appropriate.