

Harboring potential

By JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, November 5, 2015 5:00 am

ST. JOSEPH - Cecelia Cameron, a graduate student at Andrews University's School of Architecture, looks at St. Joseph and Benton Harbor and doesn't see a community where she would want to settle.

The Long Island native doesn't see a lot of safe places to walk or bike, or other amenities to attract young professionals.

Cameron and 11 other students from the university's Urban Design Studio had the opportunity to envision what the Twin Cities and its harbors could look like in the future.

If it looked and functioned like they imagine it could, "I wouldn't mind coming back," Cameron said.

The students presented their vision Wednesday at an open house at The Inn at Harbor Shores. The study was undertaken with the cooperation of the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission and the city of Benton Harbor.

SWM Planning Commission Executive Director John Egelhaaf said the study grew out of discussions that were part of St. Joseph's master plan update, that included several meetings on the future of its harbors.

The Andrews' School of Architecture was tapped due to its expertise and as a disinterested third party, Egelhaaf said.

The project was launched Aug. 24 under the supervision of Associate Professor Andrew von Maur. Students produced reams of documents and dozens of displays that illustrated data on the area along with concepts for redevelopment.

The idea was not to create a concrete plan, but to gather information that would be useful in continuing discussions about the harbor, von Maur said.

One of the big surprises was just how large the harbor area actually is, encompassing 600 acres, including 400 acres of land, Egelhaaf said.

"One of the things that was amazing was the square footage of the area," Egelhaaf said. "It's actually a really big space and it makes you think what could fit into a space that large."

Boston's Long Wharf and the waterfront of Portsmouth, N.H., which the Andrews students visited, would fit within the Twin Cities' harbor footprint, Egelhaaf said.

The Andrews students also looked at the potential for building the tax base.

von Maur said they found that the tax base per acre in downtown St. Joseph is "enormously efficient"

in making every square foot productive.

The Schu's building, for example, generates \$2.8 million in taxes per acre annually as a multi-story mixed use building with no leftover space, the study found.

In comparison, the popular and success Bread+Bar restaurant in Benton Harbor, which has no on-street parking, only generates \$76,000 in taxes per acre.

Downtown St. Joseph generates an average of \$540,000 per acre in taxes, compared to the \$120,000 generated in the Benton Harbor Arts District, according to the study.

There is 66,500 square feet of commercial space within the study area not being used, at a loss of \$19.2 million in revenue, according to a retail consultant contacted by the Andrews group.

The Benton Harbor area itself has the potential to support seven to 10 more restaurants, von Maur said.

The report envisions an agricultural and engineering campus along the waterfront that could tie Whirlpool Corp.'s strengths with the region's farming potential.

Safety is another important consideration. Egelhaaf, an avid cyclist, noted that Port Street, going past the county courthouse, is unsafe for bikers and walkers trying to cross.

Drawings prepared by students showed a more pedestrian-friendly environment with roundabouts to slow down traffic.

They even looked at the courthouse parking lot as a potential site for condominiums, with transient boat slips in the water nearby. Vehicles could be accommodated by a parking structure built on the site of the sheriff's department lot.

One of the sticking points in previous discussions has been a proposal to relocate commercial docks to the outer harbor, opening up their current sites for development.

Residents in St. Joseph's Ridgeway/Edgewater neighborhoods objected due to the potential for added truck traffic, noise and other nuisances.

von Maur said students have meet with these residents and St. Joseph city officials and spelled out the scenarios if the docks stayed where they are, and if they were moved.

Resident Ann Keech, attending the open house, said she and others appreciated the willingness of the Andrews people to listen to their concerns.

But the residents remain adamantly opposed to moving the docks, Keech said.

Marja Winters Farrow, Benton Harbor's assistant city manager and economic development director, said she is excited about the potential for the harbor as illustrated in the study.

She said it's a good starting point for future conversations.

Benton Harbor City Manager Darwin Watson said the ongoing study is a way to knit the Twin Cities together.

The study will be completed in December and the information will be made available online.

Andrews student Orean Joseph, from Antigua-Barbuda, agreed with Cecelia Cameron that Benton Harbor could become a real draw for new residents.

"The most eye-opening part of this study for me was how beautiful this city could be," he said of Benton Harbor. "It could become an actual destination. Right now there are so many opportunities."

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