

Orchard Downs redevelopment gets "green" light

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It has been fifty years since the beginning of construction at the Orchard Downs apartment complex, but now the University is looking to redevelop the area for the new millennium.

Two groups of firms, the Devonshire Development, LLC and the Vermilion Fox Atkins Partnership Development Team, have laid plans to revitalize Orchard Downs by rebuilding the area into an environmentally sensitive community. Both firms presented their ideas for the project at an informational session, which took place at the Alice Campbell Alumni Ballroom on Wednesday.

Central to both plans to redevelop Orchard Downs, which lies just south of Florida Avenue and Race Street, is the inclusion of energy efficiency in the buildings.

"We want to be forward thinking in energy uses and costs," said Neil Strack, the President of Architectural Spectrum, which is working with Devonshire Development.

"With this project the carbon footprint is extremely important," he added later.

A carbon footprint is the amount of carbon dioxide emitted by companies and households due to the combustion of fossil fuels. Carbon dioxide emissions have been attributed to the adverse affects of global warming.

Chris Hays, the head architect of the Vermilion Fox Atkins Partnership Development Team, was adamant about reducing the carbon footprint of Orchard Downs.

"We are taking a more aggressive approach than what is demanded," Hays said. "We are looking not only at geothermal (heat pumps), but also at photovoltaics (solar panels) to reduce energy use."

In addition to the reduction of energy consumption, both projects call for local and recycled materials. When it is finished, Orchard Downs will have been transformed into a multigenerational neighborhood complete with parks and other open green spaces.

Dave Cocagne, the Managing Director of Vermilion Development Corporation, embodied the spirit of the project.

"We want to promote healthy lifestyles. This will be one of the first of its kind in the country and we're hoping to be a model for others," Cocagne said.

Despite the reduction in energy, residents in the area are valuing something different - the diverse intergenerational community. Both plans will incorporate apartments with single-family homes and townhouses, creating a mixture of low and high-income households. Urbana resident Liza Goldwasser said she believes that this aspect of diversity is what makes "Orchard Downs a rare open space."

"A lot of cities don't have it so it feels bad to tamper with it," Goldwasser said.

Joan Hood, a resident of Urbana, confirmed this view. "Being a multigenerational community is important," Hood said. "It is invigorating being with students. But at the same time, it is really important to have affordable and high quality housing for grads."

Regardless of which firm the University does decide to go with, Hood did have one desire for the project.

"Keep as much green space as possible," she said.

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