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Creating dreams Studio shows the way for Gaines, Tallahassee

By Nolia Brandt

MY VIEW

Like many Tallahasseeans, I've been dreaming a long time of a place where old-timers and newcomers alike can experience the unique and creative energy of this charming Southern town. Many exciting ideas have been suggested for downtown, but is there a way to jump-start Tallahassee as a creative "go to" community?

The answer is yes.

The Knight Foundation is attempting to do just that with its Knight Creative Communities Initiative. The four KCCI groups (read about them at www.kccitallahassee.wordpress.com) are working on economic development and helping Tallahassee become a "creative class" community - growing jobs in such fields as technology, research and development, arts and culture, and other professions that rely on people's creative talents. This sector makes up 30 percent of the U.S. work force and accounts for almost half of our wages, and it will only continue to expand.

In our quest for smaller, entrepreneurial and attainable projects to generate public support and excitement within a short time frame, we found several projects that could help our community nurture and attract the creative class in the near future.

As an entrepreneur, I don't expect puny results. Smaller "creative catalyst" projects have a big job to do. They can ignite, take hold and pave the way for larger projects and more creative and ambitious change.

One such immediate and successful project is the Master Craftsman Studio on Gaines Street, where Woodward dead-ends. The studio is part of Florida State University, but it is also positioned to become a crown jewel in the Gaines Street revitalization that is under way.

So, what does this university program have to do with downtown and Gaines Street development?

The Master Craftsman Studio is an entrepreneurial, economic-development machine. Staff and students learn by doing, develop income-generating streams on an almost weekly basis to support the program, and create relationships with businesses, cities (for public-art projects), community groups and other universities. They hold the potential to launch multiple, national

and international money-making enterprises. In addition, the studio provides a one-of-a kind learning experience for students. And a large majority of their projects use recycled materials.

Best of all, the Master Craftsman Studio has created a community where new ideas and models of working are encouraged, and are in fact the norm. Students learn to identify artistic and financial opportunities, adapt to unusual partnerships and challenges, and develop the courage to envision and follow their dreams. They become entrepreneurs, successful artists and business people. The Studio creates social and economic wealth through its workers and its products. The facilities draw additional top craftsmen and women from around the world and bring projects into our local community and economy.

Bob Bischoff, a successful international artist, businessman and FSU alum, directs the studio. Bischoff helped create the studio as a way of giving back by sharing his success and experience with students and other artists. He says he “gives students the tools and resources they need to make a living doing what they love,” which is making art.

Now Bischoff and others in the community want to leverage the infectious energy of the studio to spark Gaines Street revitalization. Bischoff is proof of the fine craftsman's ability to stoke economic development. Before coming to FSU, his art business put \$2 million into the local economy in a given year.

Plans for the studio include beautiful, outdoor glass and metal forging facilities where students and artists can create 24 hours a day. The studio is designed as a place for residents to gather and observe the art process and foster the creation of other local businesses - restaurants, for example - and provide them with an opportunity to thrive. The studio will launch many fine artists into business.

Within the first year of production, the studio plans to create 20 jobs with its residency program. The program will employ five master craftsmen and create apprenticeships for 15 postgraduate artists. The combination of a pavilion and foundry and residency program will lure the nation's top emerging talent and art professionals to Tallahassee, and help establish the city as the center of art production in Florida.

On Gaines Street you'll see something totally out of place among the industrial buildings, abandoned car lots and gas stations. Look for a large tractor-trailer painted like bright blue sky, with the word “DREAM” floating among white, puffy clouds.

It's not a real piece of sky, of course, but a billboard of sorts for the Master Craftsman Studio. The students and staff want to make a point to the more than 30,000 cars that drive by its front gates each day: In the most unlikely of places, among the rusting pipes, broken windows and cracked concrete of Gaines Street, dreams can be found, created and fulfilled, if you're only willing to look up from your daily commute.

Communities dream of programs like this one. Let's hope Tallahassee leaders get behind its potential and growth the way so many of the KCCI participants have.