Ohio State to create world-class arts district

University to invest $200 million to upgrade facilities

By Encarnacion Pyle
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Ohio State University wants to invest as much as $200 million over the next decade to create an arts district centering on its arts, dance, music and performing-arts buildings.

The university envisions eventually connecting the district to the art galleries in the Short North and the museums, theaters and other artistic spaces downtown. The hope is to make Columbus a world-class arts destination.

"We live in a wonderful city, and it makes sense for us to take advantage of the cultural gems that surround us and to expand the partnerships we already have with the various arts organizations," said David Manderscheid, the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

The goal is to bring artists, dancers and musicians from Ohio State and the community together in a district that "beats with passion, life and learning," according to OSU's master plan for the next half-century.

"Our relationship with the university is very important to us," said William B. Conner, managing director and CEO of the Columbus Association for the Performing Arts. "And Ohio State's vision of creating an arts district on campus that connects the university to downtown will create a really dynamic environment for all of us."

Plans call for Sullivant Hall, Wexner Center for the Arts and Mershon Auditorium — all on High Street near 15th Avenue — to serve as the entrance to the district.

After a $33 million makeover that took more than two years, Sullivant Hall will re-open for classes in January. The three-story, neo-classical revival building, which dates to 1912, is now home to the world's largest academic cartoon library and OSU's dance- and art-education departments.

OSU's Advanced Computing Center for the Arts and Design, which is known for its pioneering work in computer graphics and animation, has also moved there from the west side of campus. And Sullivant has a new center that was created with a $6 million gift from an alumna to help students understand the business side of the arts.

The renovations include a rotunda on the east side of the building on the first floor, six new dance studios and floor-to-ceiling windows that provide a flood of natural light.

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“It’s simply spectacular and really is the heart of the new district,” OSU Provost Joseph E. Steinmetz said.

Several other OSU arts buildings have undergone major face-lifts, including Hughes (music), Hopkins (art and computing) and Hayes (art; art history; and industrial, interior and visual communication design).

In addition, Ohio State has kicked off a fundraising campaign to improve its music facilities and has committed $20 million in university funds. Plans call for expanding and renovating Weigel Hall and building an adjacent recital hall and teaching and rehearsal studios. The project is estimated to cost $40 million.

Students and faculty members already are working with local arts groups.

Opera Columbus partnered with Ohio State for its production of Puccini’s Madame Butterfly in November. Students made up half the chorus, performed in supporting roles and helped with production, said Peggy Kriha Dye, the general manager of the opera company. “For a lot of the students, it was a dream come true.”

Next semester, Opera Columbus and Ohio State will work together on Jack and the Beanstalk for the opera-goes-to-school program, which tours local schools.

Instead of trying to come up with $200 million for the district all at once, the university is paying for each project one at a time, Steinmetz said. The university has set aside $50 million for the new arts district from the $483 million up-front payment the school received for leasing its parking operation to a private investor, he said. The payout was put into OSU’s endowment, and a portion of the interest will be available for use each year, he said.

The university is inventorying its performing-arts spaces to see if they match current and future needs, Steinmetz said. And it’s exploring expanding the Wexner Center, which might include demolishing Mershon Auditorium.

The master plan also suggests that the university consider building a performing-arts complex along High Street that might include a black-box theater and a proscenium theater that could accommodate opera.

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OSU’s plans for arts district taking shape

By Jennifer Smola

The Columbus Dispatch

In this view looking south of old Cannon Drive, the new Cannon Drive can be seen in the top right corner. A committee of Ohio State University trustees on Thursday approved $5.2 million in design services for the second phase of the Cannon Drive relocation project. [FRED SQUILLANTE/DISPATCH]

Ohio State University unveiled the latest plans for its future arts district Thursday as a committee of trustees approved more than $380 million toward that project, its regional ambulatory centers and other facility projects.

The arts district, planned for the area near 15th Avenue and High Street, will include a renovated Weigel Hall housing the School of Music and a new building for the Department of Theatre, which will
house a new Moving Image Production program.

Renderings shared with the trustees' Master Planning and Facilities committee Thursday showed a new black-box theater, a recital hall for the School of Music, a proscenium theater, a lobby and rehearsal spaces.

Board members and university officials have said the renovated arts district will serve as an updated “front door” to Ohio State’s campus from High Street. Provost Bruce McPheron said Thursday the community will be reminded of Ohio State’s commitment to the visual and performing arts as soon as they walk onto campus.

“We have 15 academic colleges that span the gamut of human knowledge,” McPheron said. “And to remind ourselves when we come to campus that first and foremost … we're humans and we're inspired, I think, is just an incredibly powerful message.”

The committee approved $146.6 million for design services and construction of the arts district. The total project cost is estimated at $161.6 million.

The master planning and facilities committee also approved nearly $126 million for professional design services and construction of its planned ambulatory care center on the Northeast Side. The facility is the first of a series of ambulatory centers Ohio State plans around Columbus' I-270 Outerbelt.

The 245,000-square-foot first phase will include a brick-and-glass structure housing medical offices and an ambulatory surgical center. The project also will include a walking path and lawn for physical therapy, a central courtyard and respite garden for patients and families, 1,500 parking spaces and a roundabout entrance. A planned second phase would include a patient tower.

University officials said other ambulatory facilities will have a similar look and design. The committee also approved $6.6 million for design services for the university's West Campus ambulatory facility and $12 million for its regional ambulatory center planned for Dublin.

Thursday’s committee meetings marked the first public board of trustees meetings since former board chairman Michael J. Gasser resigned suddenly last week.

Other facility spending approved by the committee Thursday included:

- $29.7 million for construction of the new 60,000-square foot John & Mary Alford Center for Science and Technology at the OSU Newark campus
- $20.9 million for construction of the new Ty Tucker Tennis Center
- $17.5 million for design and construction of the Veterinary Medical Center’s Community Practice Hospital & Learning Center
- $11 million in design and construction costs for renovations to the main entrance of Taylor Tower
- $5.2 million in design services for the second phase of the Cannon Drive relocation project.
- $5 million in design and construction costs for updates to the seventh and eighth floors of the Morehouse Medical Plaza tower for the gastrointestinal cancer center and patient services
The full board of trustees is scheduled to vote on the facility-project spending at its meeting Friday.

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