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As one green project breaks ground, nature of grander Oberlin plan rocky

By Chuck Soder

4:30 am, March 23, 2009

East College Street in Oberlin appears to be a popular place for planning green, mixed-use development projects.

A team of three young Oberlin College alumni just started building one on the south side of the street, and the college itself is looking for an architect to design a master plan for a much larger project on the north side.

The two projects are similar in that they both would include residential and retail space while showcasing green building design and technologies. However, they differ in size and in their prospects of becoming full-blown realities, with significant financing hurdles standing in the way of the college's project.

The alumni trio in mid-January broke ground on the \$16 million East College Street Project. The college, meanwhile, in December completed a feasibility study for the Community Green Arts District, a project that's expected to cost between \$150 million and \$200 million if it's completed in its entirety.

It is unclear whether the college will be able to secure financing for the Green Arts District given the recession and the scope of the



John Rosen (from left), Naomi Sabel and Ben Ezinga are planning the East College Street Project, a green mixed-use development in Oberlin that is to contain residential and retail space while showcasing green building design and technologies.

Photo credit: RUGGERO FATICA

+ PHOTO ZOOM

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Tue 03/24

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project, said Sandra Hodge, special assistant for community and government relations at Oberlin College. The plan involves revamping much of a block that includes the Oberlin Inn, Hall Auditorium and Allen Memorial Art Museum.



"It's an expensive venture, especially in these times," she said.

The nearby East College Street Project, however, is under way after eight years of planning, said 2001 Oberlin graduate Ben Ezinga. He and Naomi Sabel, class of 2002, and Josh Rosen, class of 2001, founded development firm Sustainable Community Associates in the spring of 2001.

"We kept making steady progress," Mr. Ezinga said. "We knew this was something that had to get done."

An old auto body shop, dry cleaner and gas station formerly sat on the 2.5-acre site at the southwest corner of East College and South Pleasant streets. When finished, the project is to consist of three buildings totaling 70,000 square feet, including 22,000 square feet for commercial space and 48,000 square feet for condominiums.

Besides retail stores, the commercial space is to include a 7,000-square-foot art studio and gallery for Oberlin College students as well as space for startup companies.

Of the 33 condos slated for construction, six have been sold and 13 are being allocated to renters who earn less than 80% of the area's median income.

Quite the coalition

The East College Street Project officially got the green light when the group last November closed on a loan and commercial financing agreement from Lorain National Bank. However, it took more than the agreement to get the development off the ground, Ms. Sabel said.

The trio also received financing from foundations, a \$1.4 million tax increment financing (TIF) deal from the city of Oberlin, New Markets Tax Credits from the federal government as well as assistance from St. Louis-based development firm McCormack Baron Salazar, headed by Oberlin graduate Richard Baron.

"It was a much broader coalition of partners than a project like this normally is," Ms. Sabel said.

The low-income rental space, as well as the focus on green design and technology, helped generate support for the project, Mr. Ezinga said.

An energy usage monitoring system similar to one used in Oberlin College's dorms will allow residents and businesses to see how much energy they use and compare it to the building's total energy consumption, which will be made available online.

Among the other green features are tankless hot water heaters, paints with fewer volatile compounds and air-source heat pumps, which pull heat into the building on cold days and push it out on hot days.

In addition, the East College Street project is designed to be pedestrian-friendly and will feature a car-sharing program, Mr. Ezinga said.

"The lifestyle involves much less driving," he said.

A lengthy timeline

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The larger Green Arts District project, meanwhile, will move forward once an architect creates a master plan.

The college's current plan involves renovating Hall Auditorium and Allen Memorial Art Museum, adding student housing for upperclassmen, and replacing the 70-room Oberlin Inn with a facility that could house about 100, Ms. Hodge said.

The college's goal is to finish the project in phases in five to eight years, Ms. Hodge said. It already has begun seeking grants to renovate the art museum, which is estimated to cost \$1 million — a small piece of the project.

"It is crying out that it needs work right now," Ms. Hodge said.



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