



Businessman, students say future at stake with Lincoln arena

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This is about Lincoln's future, Mike Dunlap and Matt Schaefer agree.

Create a more dynamic, energetic, vibrant city that will be more attractive to young professionals and future civic leaders, they say.

Build the proposed new sports and entertainment arena, trigger a flurry of development and economic activity in the Haymarket, and Lincoln is on its way.

"We're losing our potential key leaders," says Dunlap, chairman and CEO of Nelnet, which depends on young professionals for its thousand-person Lincoln work force.

Schaefer, who will graduate from the University of Nebraska College of Law this spring, says the arena and a spinoff of commercial and recreational development in the Haymarket would jumpstart the city and create "a more dynamic place to work, live and play."

He has joined the arena promotion steering committee and is spearheading the effort to attract student votes supporting the project.

Dunlap says half a dozen of his best young associates left recently for jobs in Minneapolis, Denver, Kansas City and Omaha.

"Lincoln is a great place to raise a family if you're married and have kids," Dunlap says.

"But if you're young and single, it's not as robust or vibrant or attractive to young professionals as it could be with the entertainment options provided by a new arena" and an expanded and energized Haymarket district.

"The O Street bars get old real quick," Dunlap suggests.

Schaefer says Lincoln is "a great place to go to college."

"But as soon as you graduate, you head to Denver or Kansas City or Chicago or Omaha because they are more attractive places to live for young people."

Schaefer will be an exception. He has chosen to stay.

A Columbus native who was UNL student body president in 2006-07, Schaefer has joined Ruth Mueller Robak, a Lincoln government relations law firm.

"I've got three boys," Dunlap says. They are 20, 16 and 14. "And I would love to have them here when they get out of school.

"Now," Dunlap says, "a lot of people see their kids and grandkids move away."

If you want a startling example of what both Schaefer and Dunlap are talking about, take a look at the 2007 members of the Innocents Society, UNL's senior honorary.

Membership is based on academics, leadership and service. These are the potential professional and civic leaders of the future.

One each has moved to Washington, D.C.; Denver; and Kansas City. Two chose Omaha.

Six attend the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha.

Two attend UNL's Law College.

One will stay in Lincoln.

That's Matt Schaefer.

In separate interviews, Dunlap and Schaefer made some of the same points:

n Students would be attracted to the new sports and entertainment arena, thus providing a large pool of customers who will be needed to support concerts and other events.

n Young professionals with a choice of job opportunities in competing communities would be more inclined to live in Lincoln if it were a more vibrant and energetic city with more entertainment options.

n And that means more talented young people might choose to stay here after they graduate from college, return here or move here to accept employment opportunities.

Nelnet, the college student loan company that has morphed into a broad educational planning, servicing and financing operation, employs 800 people in Lincoln. It is adding 300 employees here and soon will top the 1,000 mark.

The average age of Nelnet employees is 35 and trending downward.

"Our focus is to grow in Lincoln," Dunlap says.

"We want to be able to attract and retain young professionals here and reverse the brain drain.

"A lot of bright kids graduate here and leave. But we can turn this into a cool place to live."

Schaefer says a new arena in the Haymarket would have "24,000 potential attendees" just blocks away on the UNL campus.

He's been working to organize a group of students at UNL who would identify, register and turn out voters in support of the project.

They face a challenge with the calendar: The arena vote is May 11. UNL classes end May 1; commencement is May 8; students will scatter.

"The key will be to take advantage of early voting and vote-by-mail options to ensure those who care about the arena can have their votes counted," Schaefer says.

Students who already are residents of Lincoln and spend their summers here need to be reminded to come out and vote, he says.

The arena can be "a transformative, long-term project for the city," Schaefer says.

"This is not just a new home for Husker basketball teams. We can create a signature neighborhood for Lincolnites much like Kansas City's Power and Light District, Chicago's Lincoln Park District and Omaha's Riverfront.

"This is a chance to turn the Haymarket into Lincoln's calling card."

David Burge, associate dean of admissions at UNL, can imagine incorporating a new arena into the university's student recruiting sales pitch.

"We talk at length with students about how Lincoln as a community resource enhances the educational experience at UNL," he says.

"The arena most certainly would play into that. A cosmopolitan feel is important to students who may come from Chicago or Kansas City or Minneapolis."

Megan Collins of Omaha is UNL student body president this year and plans to enter the UNL College of Law this fall. She'll graduate in May with a degree in business administration.

"Lincoln is definitely in the plans for me post-graduation," she says.

But, she suggests, students would be "far more excited about being on campus and staying in Lincoln should the arena project pass.

"No one is moving to Lincoln for a job alone," Collins says. "They're looking for a community with opportunities for weekend entertainment and total engagement in the area."

The UNL Student Senate recently approved a resolution supporting the arena project.

"Students are excited about the potential the arena has to bring groups and events to our community," Collins says.

"Groups like Taylor Swift, Kanye West, Maroon 5, Matt Nathanson, etc., would attract lots of students."

Coady Pruett is a student from northern California who came to Lincoln with his wife to attend law school.

Pruett's wife, Elizabeth, teaches at Lakeview Elementary School.

He'll graduate in May, and they're going to stay. Coady will join Cline Williams law firm and plans to be a trial attorney.

"We love Lincoln," he says. But, he suggests, it could be so much more vital and attractive with the entertainment options and associated Haymarket development spawned by a new arena.

"I'm very excited by that prospect," Pruett says.

A more vibrant city would be attractive to more young professionals, he says, and the university's new Innovation Campus would serve to introduce an array of them to the prospect of remaining in Lincoln.

The May vote offers a choice, Pruett says.

"Expand, develop and move forward," he says.

"Or stay the same."

Reach Don Walton at 473-7248 or at dwalton@journalstar.com.



Shown is the conceptual design of the arena proposed in the railyard west of the downtown post office. This rendering has an open space on the arena's doorstep for public gatherings.