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A Special Place : University of Dayton, Ohio

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Monday November 6, 2017

A Special Place

By Eric F. Spina

When I walked into the Coliseum at the former Montgomery County fairgrounds for a community forum, the feeling of excitement and possibility was palpable. The place surged with energy.

It wasn't hard, even for a newcomer, to harken back to the building's glory days of high school dances and Dayton Flyer basketball games.

Fast forward to today as the University of Dayton and Premier Health, new owners of the 38-acre former fairgrounds, are starting with a blank sheet of paper and inviting the campus, health system and community to fill it with possibilities for this underutilized parcel on the outskirts of downtown. We want to breathe new life in this land, transforming it into a landmark destination once again.

We truly are starting with a blank slate, I told a standing-room-only audience of more than 200 community members, including neighbors and alumni. "Some people believe there's a grand design, but that's not the case," added Mary Boosalis, president and CEO of Premier Health. "Let's dream big. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

For more than an hour, small groups of people from cross-sections of the Dayton community brainstormed ideas, scribbled them on oversized sheets of paper, prioritized them — and creatively envisioned what the future could hold.

They imagined a vibrant pedestrian-friendly mixed-use development on the doorstep of downtown Dayton. A place that could attract new businesses and restaurants. A place that connects to the Great Miami River and a resurgence of development in downtown Dayton. A place that welcomes young people, who want to study, live and work in our community.

"We're mindful this is a special place," Jamie Greene, co-founder and principal of the urban design firm *planning Next*, told the crowd. "We're humbled to be leading this effort. People have been helpful and hopeful. They're leaning in, wanting to give us the best of their ideas. We're trying to find the sweet spot between high-order aspirations and what we can do together. This is really a community-minded vision."

The University of Dayton community came together at the end of October in a similar exercise, and Premier Health is organizing forums within the hospital system.

Literally hundreds of innovative ideas are emerging from the collective brainpower of people who see the potential. It's not too late to participate. We want this to be a highly inclusive and collaborative process. Simply visit fairgroundstofuture.org and offer your thoughts.

More workshops will be scheduled in January to review the development framework before the master plan is finalized in February.

The future is ours to realize.