When planning the new Athletic Performance Center at Bradley University, Peoria, Ill., administrators worked with residents of a neighboring community and the city council to address concerns about the new facility.

A Vision for Growth

Expanding an education campus within established neighborhoods requires creativity and engagement.

By Thomas J. Seymour

Many colleges and universities are experiencing significant campus growth in response to the demands of increasing enrollments and evolving programs that require advanced technology and resources. Student-centered facilities in particular, including expansive recreational centers, multi-use student unions and attractive new residences, are helping to drive institutions of higher education toward major construction and capital-improvement programs.

As urban colleges and universities look to expand in order to accommodate growing programs and enrollment, working with established neighborhoods surrounding the campus often becomes a critical component to development. In order to generate community goodwill and support, it is important to communicate early and often with neighbors, present a clear vision for growth, and optimize economical solutions for sensitive land use and facility design.

For older campuses set in dense, established neighborhoods, the demand for growth in facilities and infrastructure presents a clear challenge in terms of balancing the needs and concerns of neighbors with those of colleges and universities. Not surprisingly, neighbors on the fringes of campus boundaries often
raise concerns about the impact of campus growth, citing the scale and appearance of buildings, the impact on views, building shadows, pedestrian and vehicular traffic, lighting, noise, parking and security.

Early in the master-planning process, the impact of campus expansion on neighborhoods situated around the “collar” of the campus should be considered. Colleges and universities occasionally minimize the importance of this aspect by focusing on generating master plans that meet the priorities of program growth, capital campaign strategies and local government agencies without addressing potential community concerns. Early engagement with the community to introduce the vision for growth and address the goals of the master plan through clear and straightforward communication can be vital to obtaining local buy-in and support.

What works best?

First, work with an experienced architect and planning team that has the expertise and sophistication to help bridge campus and neighborhood priorities. Flexibility is important in order to allow for the kinds of compromises and creative solutions that assuage neighborhood concerns while still meeting the programmatic and budgetary parameters of the institution. A local presence and established reputation for civic mindfulness on the part of the architect may be vital in building credibility at the outset.

Second, engage the community in open and candid forums that encourage feedback and allow for everyone to have a voice. As a starting point, consider informal meetings in the homes of key community leaders or neighbors near campus boundaries. Informal, preliminary gatherings with community members that provide candid feedback often lead to more productive public meetings and community forums. Concerns about the appearance and scale of buildings, the size of building footprints, traffic, parking, security and construction issues can be addressed readily by the institution and its design team. Again, flexibility and a willingness to address issues that arise from the community are essential. This may lead to compromises in aspects such as facade treatments, building heights, setbacks, landscaping and
A commitment to students and the community

Established in 1897, Bradley University is set on an 85-acre campus in northwest Peoria, Ill. In 2006, after working with residents of a neighboring community and the city council, the university finalized a 15-year master plan that called for new construction on a 10-acre parcel that had been acquired recently. The “Bradley Renaissance” includes the development of a new student recreation center and an athletic performance center with a 4,200-seat arena that will serve as home court for the women’s basketball and volleyball teams.

A 600-space parking garage was among the first priorities in implementing the master plan. The garage, designed with a detailed articulation along the facade to complement the nearby residential community, alleviates the demand for student parking along neighborhood streets. New perimeter lighting enhances security, but is designed at a neighborhood scale. Several traffic control and “calming” measures also have been implemented, including new traffic signals and barriers.

Design of the recreation center and the new arena incorporates ample expanses of glass, enlivening the buildings and allowing activities to be viewed from the outside. Generous amounts of landscaped green space, plazas and new walkways help continue a residential feel into the structures along the campus border.

“A capital program of this size requires a mosaic of communication with neighbors and public officials,” says Gary Anna, who is overseeing the master-plan development for the university. “Experience is a great teacher and we’ve learned it’s difficult to communicate too often with neighborhood and community representatives. Nearby property owners understandably are concerned about changes within their neighborhood. Every institution has its own mindset and pressure points in terms of balancing program needs and community concerns.

“Our approach is to approach our growth as a good neighbor would,” says Anna. “We consider what’s in the best interest of the students and the city, as well as our closest neighbors. We’ve found that obtaining early feedback really helps us to address concerns and be respectful of external constituencies. It’s an ongoing process.”

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Seymour is executive vice president with PSA-Dewberry, Peoria, Ill., a national design firm that has worked with Bradley University for more than 25 years. He can be reached at tseymour@dewberry.com.