

University Square vision takes shape

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CHAPEL HILL -- Developers plan housing, more office space and a grassy gathering place for downtown as part of a new **123 W. Franklin St.**, the current home of the University Square shopping center.

But it could be four to eight years before you'll sip iced tea on the lawn.

The public got to hear plans for the first phase of the redevelopment project Wednesday night. The project would transform University Square, which bridges East and West Franklin Street, into a retail, residential and office-space complex, connecting the UNC-Chapel Hill campus with downtown.



"For Franklin Street to remain vibrant and viable, it will have to grow and change," said John Martin, project executive with Elkus Manfredi Architects.

The UNC-Chapel Hill Foundation bought the property, which houses the shopping center and Granville Towers student dormitories, for \$46 million from now-deceased real estate entrepreneur Frank Kenan. The first phase of the redevelopment on nearly seven of the site's 12 acres, would consist of three-, four- or five-story buildings and an interior grassy courtyard.

Developers hope to break the area into smaller, more manageable blocks, bringing shops closer to pedestrians. A parking lot now sits between the shopping center and sidewalk.

Other plans include 40,000 square feet of retail space and widening sidewalks to 25 feet for outdoor dining and merchandise displays. There will be 24 townhomes on the east side of the complex and 120 market-rate apartments for non-students.

Office space will be the largest portion of the complex, at 275,000 square feet.

The site's strategic location between the university and downtown makes it a good place for mixed use, particularly office space, which developers say the town needs.

"We think there is a significant demand for multilevel office space in downtown," said John McColl, an executive vice president of **Cousins Properties**.

The project would also feature a 78,000-square-foot cultural center, which would host community events, and possibly plays and concerts.

One question raised during the meeting included whether to extend Pittsboro Street toward Franklin Street. Such an extension is not in the concept plan, but developers said it will resurface in town discussions this year.

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An additional 550 parking spaces will be added to the site, according to the plan, which includes a central parking structure hidden from passers-by.

The entire project is slated for completion in 30 to 50 years, but developers said they will submit a plan for the first phase to the town this fall.