

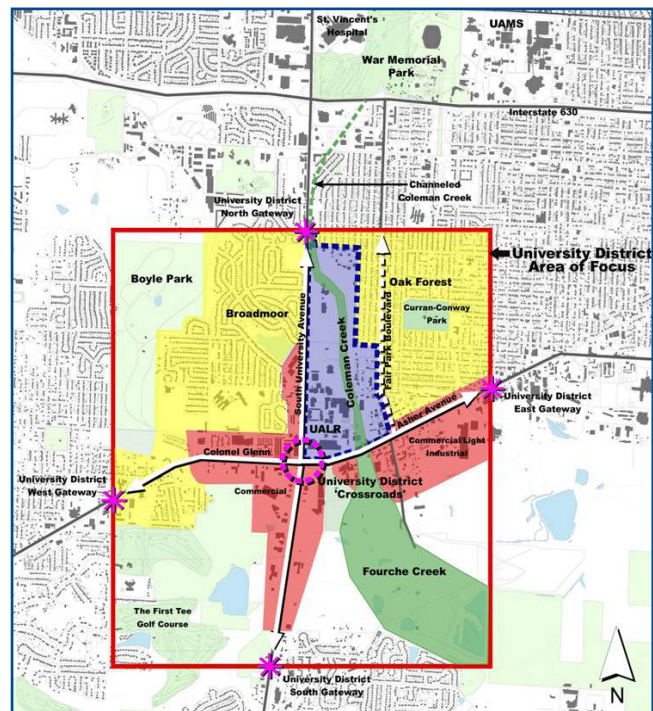


*The above rendering is a futuristic view of the University District.*

## INTRODUCTION

The University District Partnership will redevelop the areas around the University of Arkansas at Little Rock campus, creating a dynamic urban place and improving the quality of life for all persons who live, work, learn, play, shop, socialize, and worship in the area. Located in the heart of the city and anchored by the UALR campus, the University District includes the homes, workplaces, and schools for thousands of families, workers, business-owners, teachers, and students.

The University District Partnership grew out of UALR's 2004 strategic planning and campus master planning efforts, which describe programs, services, and facilities for a future enrollment of 20,000 students. UALR has embarked on a large-scale combined campaign to finance its long-range growth, which will have a profound impact on the surrounding neighborhoods and commercial districts. Conversely, the character and condition of the surrounding areas influence the University's ability to attract faculty, students, and staff. UALR leaders recognized that the substantial public investment in university programs and facilities can be leveraged to stimulate private investment in the surrounding area. The leaders also recognized that, in Arkansas, universities do not have the authority or the resources for major off-campus redevelopment programs. In 2004, they convened a group of neighborhood, community, business, and civic leaders and formed an informal partnership to redevelop and revitalize the area.



The planning and policy framework for the University District Partnership consists of a Revitalization Plan that addresses the real estate development needs of the area and this Strategic Plan that addresses socio-economic conditions of the area. Both plans were completed in mid-2007. The Revitalization Plan describes major physical development projects that will upgrade the basic public infrastructure of the area. It is being prepared by an urban planning firm, Wallace Roberts Todd (WRT), with public involvement in three community workshops. The Strategic Plan describes partnerships for delivering programs and services to the area. It compiles reports and recommendations prepared previously by a visioning workshop and several working groups.

Although published separately, the two plans contain complementary information and recommendations with references to each document and links to electronic editions posted on the University District Partnership website, [www.ualr.edu/universitydistrict](http://www.ualr.edu/universitydistrict).

## SUMMARY

This Strategic Plan sets out major goals and strategies to address socio-economic conditions in the University District. A companion document, the University District Revitalization Plan addresses physical redevelopment needs within the area. These master plans provide the direction and framework for the University District Partnership to revitalize and redevelop the area, creating a dynamic urban place that will be a primary destination for the central Arkansas community for several future generations.

**Historical Background.** In 1958, the City of Little Rock widened Hayes Street and renamed it University Avenue. The north-south arterial street quickly became the focal point for new residential and commercial development in the metropolitan area. In effect, University Avenue became the new “main street” for Little Rock. New subdivisions centered on University attracted thousands of families providing a market for the city’s first major commercial centers located at the Markham and Asher intersections on University. The shops, restaurants, and entertainment venues at both intersections became major statewide destinations.

The Markham and University intersection attracted suburban mall developments with Park Plaza and University Mall anchored by Dillard’s, Sears, JC Penney, MM Cohn, and Montgomery Ward. The Asher/University intersection attracted large-scale strip shopping centers at each of its four corners. The Village Shopping Center on the southeast corner of Asher included the Cinema 150 dome theater, the first large-screen movie theater in Arkansas; McDonald’s first Little Rock franchise on University Avenue across from the UALR campus; Kmart developed the southwest corner of the University/Asher intersection; and Wal-Mart constructed a store further west on Asher Avenue. Tens of thousands of people worked, shopped, and dined in the area every day. The population of the mid-town area grew substantially during the 1960s and early 1970s.

During this time, UALR made the transition from a small, private college to the major commuter campus of the University of Arkansas System. Between 1969 and 1975, UALR’s enrollment doubled from 3,500 to 7,000 and the campus developed to accommodate the growth. Substantial public and private investments were made during the 1960s and 1970s that fueled the development boom in the mid-town area.

The city’s westward growth continued during the 1970s and 1980s. By 1990, Interstate 430 became the center of gravity for new residential and commercial development and growth in the mid-town area leveled off. However, population growth in the University District area has been flat since 1990. In com-





The Mosaic church on Asher Avenue is working on plans to renovate the vacant K-Mart building to look like the above rendering.

stagnated or declined. No major public infrastructure investment has taken place in the area in two decades. The ratio of homeowner households is declining as single-family houses are converted to rental properties. Deferred maintenance on much of the residential and commercial buildings increases blight in the area. Older commercial areas have obsolete buildings, and fragmented land ownership inhibits large scale redevelopment. Physical deterioration contributes to a higher incidence of code violations and nuisance crimes in the area.

**Revitalization/Redevelopment Programs.** Successful revitalization and redevelopment programs stimulate new public and private investment, arresting physical and economic decline and generating new growth. Several redevelopment programs have succeeded in the Little Rock metropolitan area and can serve as models for the University District Partnership. The River Project has created a boom in downtown Little Rock and North Little Rock; the Argenta Community Development Corporation has transformed the older residential neighborhood area of North Little Rock; and the South Main Street Project is having a dramatic impact south of I-630 in Little Rock. In addition, on a national level, many urban and metropolitan universities have

led redevelopment programs for areas around their campuses that illustrate best practices approaches. In fact, most inner-city universities have established some type of partnership or alliance to redo adjacent neighborhoods. The University of Southern California in Los Angeles; University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia; Ohio State in Columbus; Howard University in Washington, D.C.; Marquette University in Milwaukee; Yale University in New Haven; and Trinity University in Hartford illustrate best practices for these initiatives.

**Partners.** Successful redevelopment programs use partnerships, coalitions, and alliances to attract and focus new investment in target areas. Urban neighborhoods have complex social fabrics, tightly integrated economies and physical infrastructures and are served by a myriad of public institutions and businesses. In most urban settings, addressing socio-economic problems and urban blight requires a team rep-

### The University District Partnership will create new urban places...

- Where a person can get a meal, buy a suit, walk a dog, buy fresh produce, ride a bike, work out, live safely and securely, earn a living, raise a family, entertain friends, play, learn, take in a movie or a play, see an art exhibit
- Where UALR faculty and staff choose to live, play, and walk to work
- Where academic achievement surpasses national norms, where every child thrives and every high school student graduates and every high school graduate has an opportunity to attend UALR
- Where every type of Little Rock household can find a suitable, affordable residence
- Where people are feel safe in their homes and walking in their neighborhoods
- Where a person can meet and enjoy people from other cultures and places

representing local governments, public schools, state social services agencies, private nonprofit service agencies, private developers, and engaged neighborhood associations. For the River Project, the major partners included Pulaski County, City of Little Rock, City of North Little Rock, William Jefferson Clinton Presidential Library, private businesses, chambers of commerce, and other private and nonprofit organizations. The Argenta CDC partners include North Little Rock and major property owners in its downtown area. The South Main Street program involves major property owners who formed a special improvement district. The University District Partnership engages Little Rock, the Little Rock School District, UALR, businesses, financial institutions, neighborhood and property owners associations, churches, and private nonprofit agencies such as Audubon Arkansas in rebuilding the area.



**Assets.** Even heavily blighted urban areas usually have important community assets that can provide a foundation for rebuilding. The River Project emphasized the Arkansas River as an asset, modeled after successful programs in Portland. The Argenta redevelopment program recognized the historic character of the downtown North Little Rock residential areas and preserved, restored, and repaired more than a hundred of the small, craftsman-styled houses in the area. The South Main Street program recreated the area's urban experience by preserving and restoring old storefront commercial buildings and enhancing them with a well-designed streetscape. Several assets distinguish the University District area and make it a primary destination within central Arkansas.

- **Easy Access.** The neighborhoods are within close proximity and easy driving time or a short bus ride of major employment, medical, and shopping destinations in mid-town and downtown Little Rock. With the recent dramatic increases in fuel costs, living close to work and school results in significant financial savings for families. Also, most of the houses and apartments in the University District are within a short bicycle ride or walk to the UALR campus. Pedestrian and bicycling experiences will be improved by planned bicycle lanes and pathways that will connect with trails planned by the Little Rock Parks Department.

- **Neighborhood Character.** The Oak Forest and Fair Park neighborhoods extended the street grid from downtown areas, but housing styles changed to include more brick and stone cottages, bungalows, and early ranch-style houses. Across University Avenue, the Broadmoor and Point O' Woods neighborhoods were the first large-scale planned subdivi-



*The large oak trees canopy the neighborhood surrounding Fair Park Boulevard.*

sion developments that departed from the traditional street grid by limiting access into the neighborhood, discouraging through traffic and eliminating alleys. Houses built west of University Avenue were larger ranch-style residences with attached garages and car ports. Today, almost half-a-century later, the neighborhoods are completely developed, and a massive canopy of oak trees shades the area.

- **Affordable Housing.** Single-family houses in good condition can be purchased in the University District area at relatively lower costs per square foot than west Little Rock neighborhoods. Homes showing signs of deferred maintenance can be purchased at even lower costs and repaired for a fraction of what new or existing houses cost in other areas of the city.

- **Schools and Child Development Services.** Elementary school children from University District neighborhoods attend Bale, Franklin, and Wilson Elementary Schools, which are close enough for walking, biking, or short driving distances. UALR's Children International program provides ancillary services at these three schools as well as three additional elementary schools in the mid-town and southwest Little Rock area. Ancillary programs include health and dental screening, school supplies, and after-school recreation, mentoring, and tutoring programs.

- **International Culture.** Several Asian and Hispanic restaurants and grocery stores are located in the area. In addition, the Mexican Consulate, located adjacent to the Town and Country Shopping Center, is expected to generate additional Mexican dining and retail stores. Also, UALR is attracting an increasing number of international students and faculty who add to the international influence of the area.

- **UALR Educational and Cultural Programs.** UALR anchors the University District with 12,000 students, 2,500 employees and an annual operating budget of \$132 million. Its performing arts, cultural and sports events attract several thousand more persons to the area each year making the campus the primary destination for the south mid town area of Little Rock.



**Priorities and Program Initiatives.** Revitalizing the University District area depends largely on reestablishing it as a primary destination within central Arkansas for new family households who want affordable housing in close proximity to mid-town and downtown Little Rock. Attracting new families, especially homeowner families, depends largely on having affordable housing and high quality public schools available in safe and secure neighborhoods. Program priorities for the University District Partnership are to develop affordable housing for both owners and renters, to improve the quality of area schools, and to improve public safety in the area.

The University District Partnership will address these priorities through three program initiatives. First, the Partnership will establish a CDC to develop affordable housing and neighborhood improvements. Second, it will work with the Little Rock School District, the UALR College of Education, and the UALR Children International program to advance the concept of partnership schools in the area. The Partnership School concept has been used successfully by several urban universities, including the University of Pennsylvania in west Philadelphia. Third, the Partnership will introduce and advocate the CPTED concept to improve public safety in the area.

**Action Agenda.** During the next 12 months, the University District Partnership will begin implementing the Strategic Plan and Revitalization Plan. Implementation entails adoption of major plan elements by key partners, development of program organizational entities that qualify for funding and have the authority to carry out plan initiatives, and identity development for the district, as well as creating awareness about the District through an aggressive campaign.

- **Plan Adoption.** Present plans for land use, master street, special zoning districts and design overlay districts, recommended in the University District Revitalization Plan to the city of LR for adoption. The adoption of these land use and zoning changes involve an extensive public process managed and directed by the City's Planning and Zoning Department. Once specific changes are identified, the households and property owners in the affected area will be notified, and the Planning Commission will conduct public hearings on the recommended changes. Final recommendations ad-

**Principles.** University District Partnership will adhere to several principles to create a dynamic urban place. It will:

- Focus on areas immediately adjacent to the UALR campus
- Employ an inclusive decision making process
- Build community partnerships and constituencies to own, support, and carry out University District initiatives
- Establish and follow urban design standards, including guidelines for Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED)
- Emphasize diversity of people and experiences
- Emphasize new business and commercial forms
- Apply energy conservation measures in every endeavor

## University District Partnership Major Goals

**Historic Character.** Establish the University District as a destination of choice that attracts new families and businesses.

**Housing.** Establish the University District as a place where every type of Little Rock household can find a suitable, affordable home.

**Public Safety.** Establish the University District as a place where people feel safe in their homes and walking in their neighborhoods.

**Education.** Raise academic achievement at every educational level within the University District population.

**Economic Development.** Improve the economic well-being of families, individuals, and businesses within the University District

**Environmental Quality.** Improve the environmental quality of the University District.

**Cultural Identity.** Establish the University District as a primary international business, arts, and cultural destination within the central Arkansas metropolitan area.

**Human Services.** Reduce dependency and improve living conditions for persons with special needs living in the University District.

**Technology.** Establish the technology infrastructure in the University District so that residents and businesses can make full use of e-government and e-business services.

opted by the Commission will be referred to the City Board of Directors for final adoption by city ordinance. University District Partnership staff will work closely with property owners and neighborhood associations to communicate with area residents and businesses about the proposed changes and whether the changes have the necessary public support.

- **Program Development.** Incorporate the University District CDC and establish it as a tax-exempt nonprofit corporation to carry out affordable housing and neighborhood improvement elements of the Strategic Plan. In addition, assess other organizational approaches such as Central Business Improvement Districts and Community Redevelopment Authorities as implementation vehicles for different aspects of the Revitalization Plan.

- **Marketing Campaign.** The marketing campaign will be designed to communicate with University District residents, stakeholders, constituents, and partners. The goal of the campaign will be to establish and reinforce an identity for the District and build community involvement in its initiatives. Initially, print materials will be developed to present essential information from the Strategic and Revitalization Plans to key constituents. Presentations will be made to community groups, organizations, associations, and any other gatherings of people

with interest in the District's progress. The meetings will be used to get input from the public on shaping University District Partnership programs and services.

**Conclusion.** The University District has several important quality of life attributes for central Arkansas families. It offers affordable housing close to mid town and downtown destinations. Its neighborhoods have a historic character reminiscent of the post World War II era. However, during the past two decades the area did not attract enough investment to renew itself and it has not competed successfully to attract new growth. Now, with an engaged community focused on family-friendly improvements for the area, the University District Partnership stands ready to lead its revitalization. The University District partners are ready for progress.

**THE UNIVERSITY  
DISTRICT PARTNERS ARE  
READY FOR PROGRESS.**