

THE PLAIN DEALER

Laying out a dream: 'District of Design'

Two pitch city as consumer-product king

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Two men who envision Cleveland as a world leader in consumer-product design took their big idea to the street last week.

Audiences were intrigued, but only time will tell whether the "District of Design" takes root or withers in downtown Cleveland's struggling economy.

With glossy handouts and a PowerPoint presentation, economic development guru Edward "Ned" Hill and industrial designer Daniel Cuffaro pitched the idea to about 40 designers and real estate pros Friday morning.

The design district would radiate east of Playhouse Square to East 36th Street, encompassing Cleveland State University and 100-plus design-related companies already in the area, said Hill, the university's vice president for economic development.

Hill and Cuffaro, head of industrial design at the Cleveland Institute of Art, said the institute and other schools within a 300-mile radius of Cleveland are producing top design talent that leaves for the East and West coasts.

"We want to be locally thick in talent that is globally scarce," Hill said.

The district's core would be wholesale showrooms and design studios along Euclid Avenue, from Playhouse Square to East 22nd Street.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of jobs would spin out as the district becomes a magnet for consumer-product design, manufacture, research and marketing.

That's the concept, anyway. Keys to success are consumer-product companies willing to invest in downtown showrooms and storefronts, and property owners with prime space.

One of those owners could be Gordon Priemer, a developer with seven buildings along Euclid Avenue.

He liked the Friday pitch but warned that design businesses must cluster to build a critical mass, rather than disperse through the proposed 24-block district.

Hill and Cuffaro said that four midsize consumer-product companies have a keen interest in the district. They would not identify the firms.

The pair met with a number of companies Tuesday at the art institute. Among them was Vita-Mix Corp., the Olmsted Falls maker of food blenders.

Jonathan Katz, director of engineering and product development for Vita-Mix, said he likes the idea of taking clients to a company storefront in downtown Cleveland.

Viktor Schreckengost Studios, which promotes the legacy of the local, legendary artist and industrial designer, is also studying a move into the area.

Meanwhile, city officials are moving on the design concept. Brian Reilly, Cleveland's director of economic development, said the city will help compile an inventory of properties.

"We will pursue this strategy as aggressively as possible," he said.

Plain Dealer Reporter Sarah Hollander contributed to this story.