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INNOVATION CAMPUS

Innovation Campus relishing its newfound momentum

Chris Dunker
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Tetrad Property Group is constructing a \$15.3 million building at Nebraska Innovation Campus for mixed-use office space with small- and mid-sized companies in mind.

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As Nebraska Innovation Campus was preparing to open a little more than three years ago, university and research park officials asked lawmakers and regents for patience.

Speaking to the Board of Regents in September 2014, then-Chancellor Harvey Perlman said the park's biggest obstacle would be showing an activity level capable of sparking excitement from potential partners.

"You want people to believe there is actually something there," Perlman said at the time. "It's hard to attract people to go out there to be pioneers when they would be isolated."

Innovation Campus, it seems, has found that spark and begun stoking it into a fire.

Hundreds of students take classes at the Food Innovation Center each first amenity on campus -- The Mill Coffee and Bistro -- has become a destination for meetings and study sessions, and a construction crane towers over what campus officials are describing as a modern office building unlike any other in Lincoln set to open later this year.

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"It's come together much faster than what we anticipated," said Dan Duncan, executive director of Nebraska Innovation Campus.

Achieving what Duncan calls "critical mass" has earned Innovation Campus national recognition. Last fall, Innovation Campus was recognized as the "Emerging Research Park" by the Association of University Research Parks for its success attracting and creating new businesses -- as well as jobs.

At the last Innovation Campus census, conducted by UNL's Bureau of Business Research, which counted the critical mass up to July 1, 2017, there were roughly 350 permanent positions at the park, along with 60 part-time jobs and 56 internships.

That doesn't count the students taking classes in the UNL Department of Food Science and Technology, now headquartered in the renovated 4-H Building on the former state fairgrounds, or the membership of the Innovation Studio makerspace.

The annual report, which is submitted to the Legislature each December, is a request made by NU for an appropriation to establish an evergreen construction fund, provides valuable insight into how Innovation Campus is growing each year.

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“Right now, we’re a little heavy on university versus private sector, but the university isn’t growing out here, but the private sector is,” Duncan said. “Over time, a goal is about one-third university employees and two-thirds private sector.”

One hundred percent of the 380,000 square feet of space already built has been leased, Duncan said. Another 80,000 square feet of space in a \$15.3 million building now under construction will open in September.

Innovation Campus hopes to have lease commitments signed for about half of the building by the end of August.

According to a development plan for NIC, securing half of the space in the newest, unnamed building would trigger the next round of development.

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That's when things get interesting. As far as Innovation Campus is concerned, the 250 acres along Salt Creek are a blank canvas.

While Innovation Campus is constantly entertaining inquiries from companies about office or lab space, it's also trying to find ways to add kindling to the fire in a way that can bring more people to campus.

One idea Duncan said Innovation Campus is considering in the near future -- as early as 2019 -- is bringing a hotel to campus, providing a place to stay for visiting researchers or company executives, or to work in concert with the conference center.

Along with a hotel could come a full-service restaurant and a fitness center, two other amenities included in the long-term master plan for Innovation Campus.

Duncan said Innovation Campus is currently exploring a partnership with UNL's Hospitality, Restaurant and Tourism Management program to develop a concept of a student-run hotel complete with 100 to 200 rooms.

"We would like it to be a nonbranded hotel so you would have the flexibility to do some of the more unique things," Duncan said, "even researching what the hotel room of the future looks like and allowing people to try that out."

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No official plans for future development have been announced as of yet, but Duncan said "if the stars align," a hotel could begin development a lot sooner than the 2019 target.

Right now, everything's on the table, Duncan said. Rarely does Innovation Campus shut down a proposal before it at least considers how it would add to the momentum the campus is now seeing.

"There was a purpose behind calling this Innovation Campus and not a research park," Duncan said. "Innovation takes a lot of different forms. Anyone looking to do innovative products or services, add opportunities for faculty or students is using their imagination in how they want to innovate to be competitive in the future."

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