Coffee Shop Coming to 'the Living Room of the University'

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On June 18, a curious survey was emailed to Metropolitan State University students by interim Director of Student Development Philip Fuehrer. The market research survey asked participants to share their favorite coffee beverage, rank their most crucial café ambiance factors, and asked a number of other questions aimed at appreciating every student's java jive.

The survey was sent on behalf of a South Minneapolis Thai restaurant potentially interested in opening its second location in Metro's new Student Center. The restaurant backed out long before the survey or construction could be completed, but the questionnaire marked another shift of focus in the search for Metro's new Student Center's food service vendor.

Problems began early in construction. The plan was to build in phases. Phases one and two would build up to code compliance, while phase three would outfit the Student Center cafeteria with whatever kitchen equipment specifics the vendor required. But core soil samples taken before construction failed to reveal the depth of contamination, which would later be discovered and delay operations.

"With the soil litigation and the contaminated soils out there, we had to put in what is called a sub-slab depressurization system—an SSDS—for over a quarter of a million dollars—that was a surprise," Fuehrer said. "That forced us to dip into the contingency money and [we weren't] sure [we'd] have all the money to do all of the phases up front." Among other aspects of construction, the contingency budget was meant to fund the Student Center's three-phase buildout.

In the wake of the SSDS contingency fund drainage, Fuehrer was sending RFPs (requests for proposals) out to vendors to solicit those interested in moving into the new Student Center. Fuehrer said the response, or lack thereof, was less than warm. "Some of the bigger hitters in the university markets came back and said 'it's a new building with a lot of unknowns.’ Yes, you have sales figures for the university, but the new way it's configured[…] From a conservative business perspective you want to have some assurances, a good return on your investment, and I can see where a new building entirely unproven, that is not connected—I understand how they could be scared." He added, "They declined to put in a proposal."

The lack of contingency money for phase three building, combined with the lack of bigger vendor interest, seemed to have run the search into a dead end. "Not having a vendor in place makes [phase three] difficult," Fuehrer said. "Why equip a kitchen with a deep fryer if the vendor won't require one?"

Instead of preparing for the unknown and risking sunken costs, Fuehrer refocused. "We put all of phase three on a temporary hold," Fuehrer said. "We started making priority decisions on where can we cut. Let's not do a full buildout if we don't have a vendor in place," he said. Fuehrer began a shift to target a coffee, pastry, grab-and-go, prepared food approach.

That new target came with much lower overhead expenses, which lent construction some flexibility. "Furred cinder block walls were among the budget shifts," Fuehrer said. "Phasing the construction moved resources to a fireplace, more mats for the fitness center, rubber flooring in the fitness center, upgraded electronics… if Pentaho, Lancer, Sodexo or some of the heavy hitters in the university market had RFP'd, different decisions would have been made and the full industrial kitchen would have been built," he continued.

Postponing the phase three development has also given Fuehrer's vendor search a new, scaled back RFP for what he sees as the living room of Metro. Fuehrer said that "We want a sustainable vendor with fair pricing [that isn't too high]. Someone who has a pricing mechanism in place that the students don't balk at and say: 'This blows, I'm gonna go across the street'" (for a dollar coffee or sandwich from Burger King). "There's something in the middle," he added.

Leading candidates now include a cake designer, an Ethiopian/Somali restaurant looking to expand, and a few with industry experience who are looking to strike out on their own. Fuehrer says his hope is to narrow the field of interested contenders and be entering negotiations by mid-August.

With the Center scheduled to open in October 2015, Fuehrer is optimistic that whoever occupies the cafeteria space will be serving Metro students when classes begin in January 2016. Until then, the seemingly endless search for a vendor—like the construction—continues.

Caption: Construction workers are continuing to build the Student Center.

Photo credit: Kevin Miller