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Posted on Tue, Oct. 5, 2010

Fry unveils neighborhood strategy for Drexel

By Susan Snyder INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

A key architect of the University of Pennsylvania's successful plan to revitalize its neighborhood, John A. Fry - now president of Drexel University - appears poised to make history repeat itself.

In his first major address to the Drexel community on Tuesday, Fry outlined a five-point plan to improve the Drexel neighborhood, including an expanded patrol area and a loan forgiveness program for employees who buy homes in the area.

He also pledged expertise and fundraising support for the area's public elementary school and an effort to improve the business district along Lancaster Avenue.

"I would like to think when we're selling Drexel, the neighborhood is also selling it," he said in an interview.

But Fry, who became president Aug. 1, found that's not the case. He lamented what he sees in Drexel's Powelton and Mantua neighborhoods: littered streets, dilapidated houses and broken street lights. As Drexel has grown in enrollment exponentially, students are moving further into the neighborhood to live.

"It's an environment which is not necessarily an inviting one, and it's an environment that houses over 5,000 of our students," said Fry, who was hired last March after eight years as president of Franklin and Marshall College. "It's kind of chaotic."

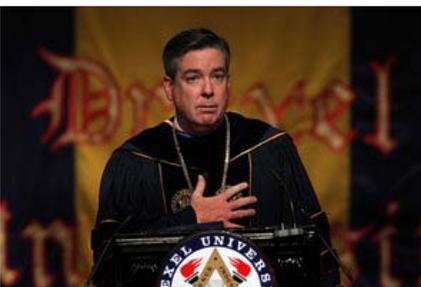
Speaking at the school's convocation in the main building auditorium, Fry said he wants Drexel to spur improvement.

"Let us mark today as the beginning of a new phase of a high impact university-community partnership that will lift Drexel University and its surrounding neighborhoods to new heights," Fry said, receiving a standing ovation.

He also announced that the university had put the president's house in Strafford up for sale and will find a house in the campus neighborhood - a symbolic commitment to the community. Dubbed the Orchards, the 2.8-acre estate, donated by an alumna and her husband, is on the market for \$2.7 million.

Fry said he will not live in the house, but will remain in the Haverford area where he is renting a house and where he lived while working at Penn. His two school-age children attend the private Shipley School.

Since coming to campus, Fry has been meeting with politicians, community leaders and civic organizations, looking to reestablish the relationships he once had as an executive at the University of Pennsylvania.



New Drexel President John Fry gives his convocation speech and announces new plans for the neighborhood and the West Philadelphia campus on Tuesday morning, October 5, 2010. (Laurence Kesterson / Staff Photographer)

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At Penn, Fry oversaw finances, human resources, facilities and other areas. Fry helped bring in a movie theater and grocer, was involved in the creation of the public Penn Alexander School and launched the University City District in 1997, fostering relations among colleges, retailers and residents. He served as president of the district board for five years while at Penn.

He was particularly struck by his meeting last month with the Powelton Village Civic Association and found many of their concerns and goals for the community were similar to his.

George Poulin, president of the civic association board, said his organization is excited about the potential for collaboration.

"The Powelton Village Master Plan has allowed us to articulate the community's vision for the future of our neighborhood, and we feel very fortunate to now have an interested audience in Drexel," he said. "The community presented opportunities for collaboration in terms of housing, public schools, retail development, and streetscape improvements. President Fry seemed engaged with what we had to say."

He agreed with Fry's assessment about some areas of the neighborhood.

"Powelton Village has a wonderful core of well-maintained historic homes, but parents and students arriving at Drexel for the first time would never believe it based on the condition of blocks surrounding campus," he said.

Under Fry's plan, Drexel will expand its security patrol area deeper into West Philadelphia. It would expand from Spring Garden to Wallace Street, which is in Mantua, east to about 31st Street and West to 42nd Street. Drexel will pay the University City District about \$750,000 annually to add patrols; an effort to keep the area cleaner also will be launched.

Blue light safety phones and possibly more close circuit surveillance will be added, he said.

The zone could be expanded even further eventually, he said.

Drexel also has pumped up the cash incentive for employees to live in the neighborhood and tripled the area that qualifies. The school will give new home owners within the boundaries of 31st to 42nd streets and Chestnut Street to Mantua Avenue a \$15,000 forgiveness loan, to be paid over five years at \$3,000 a year if an employee stays. That's five times the amount of the previous incentive program, of which no employees took advantage, he said.

"There are a lot of homes in this area where \$15,000 can get you a lot of mileage," he said.

The school also will give current Drexel employees who live in the neighborhood a one-time \$5,000 home improvement grant, he said.

Fry said the university will look to add more residential housing on campus, but gave no specific plans. He's concerned about the condition of some homes converted into student residences, questioning whether they meet city inspection standards and basics such as sprinkler systems.

The conditions, he said, "make me very nervous even though it's not quote Drexel housing," he said. "I feel I have a sort of moral obligation to our students no matter what housing they're living in."

The conversion to more student housing also has changed the neighborhood, replacing what was once stable family homes with student residents and other transient housing, he said.

University officials also will look to partner with the parents association at Powel School, a K-4 public school that serves the neighborhood. He said he'd also like to explore with the school district the possibility of expanding it to sixth or eighth grades, an interest he's heard from the community.

"Drexel is going to basically step in and seek corporation and foundation support as well as put in its own resources," he said, helping the school to write grants and seek foundation support.

But at this point, he doesn't envision subsidizing the school budget, as Penn does at Penn Alexander. The university gives the school \$1,000 per pupil.

In cooperation with the University City District, Drexel will look at the Lancaster Avenue corridor from 34th Street to 40th Street, looking to attract shopping, other businesses and amenities and arts and culture. The initiative would be similar to the efforts Penn made on 40th Street and recent revitalization along Baltimore Avenue.

The university doesn't have a fixed budget for the neighborhood initiatives, Fry said, but added that it will be an "important financial commitment on the part of Drexel."

He hopes that Drexel's commitment spurs a larger effort, as happened at Penn.

"At Penn, there were a lot of investors, agencies, organizations, institutions. That's what you want to have - as many different partners as possible," he said.

Fry said he will further flush out his vision for the university in April when his inauguration is held.

He expects the neighborhood project to take a decade or two. Penn's revitalization took several years to begin to have impact, he said.

"What better time than now to get started," he said.

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