

**To a Higher Degree Commentary
For St. Cloud Times March 25, 2012
Earl H. Potter III, President, St. Cloud State University**

In recent months St. Cloud State University and the broader community have celebrated multiple milestones in the return of Fifth Avenue to its early 20th century glory as the city's liveliest thoroughfare.

The ambitious vision for a revitalized thoroughfare rooted in Fifth Avenue's heritage as one of St. Cloud's greatest streets is the product of a partnership of city, state and local business leaders. It is not common for universities and communities to work together in this way but in St. Cloud both city and university leaders have recognized that our futures are inextricably intertwined. One cannot succeed if the other does not. With this vision before us, multiple dreamers have breathed life into a series of enterprises with the potential to dramatically shift the way we view our campus and community.

Some highlights include:

- In November, construction began on the university's Integrated Science and Engineering Laboratory Facility – or ISELF. Measured in dollars, it's the largest single building project in campus history, creating and sustaining hundreds of jobs and laying the foundation for a research facility that will support science education and science-based industry in Minnesota.
- In January, the grand opening of the River's Edge Convention Center – an expansion of the former St. Cloud Civic Center – dazzled visitors. The project involves more than 200,000 hours of construction labor, and an estimated 270 new permanent jobs are created throughout the region to support facility operations. The overall economic impact of the expanded facility will grow by 73 percent.
- Last month, we broke ground on an expanded and enhanced arena to give our hockey players and fans a richer experience and provide a future venue for concerts and other forms of entertainment that St. Cloud has not been able to accommodate. Construction on the National Hockey and Event Center will involve about 90 construction jobs.

These projects are in addition to the wealth of development taking place between the corridor's anchors, the city's River's Edge Convention Center on the north, and the university's soon-to-be expanded National Hockey and Event Center on the south.

Each initiative has collective benefits for a campus and community whose futures and fortunes are intertwined. Our campus community and our students are enriched by this vibrant community activity and growth. The presence of a variety of lively retail, arts, culture, restaurants and services adds vitality to their student years.

Our students as well as community residents and visitors are welcoming three new dining options to the already rich variety of establishments on Fifth Avenue. A variety of new business and service opportunities are going into historic buildings that are being repurposed.

For example, the old St. Cloud Opera House is being turned into an office setting where entrepreneurs, small businesses and corporate workgroups can lease office and meeting space. In addition, the space will be a display space for artwork from St. Cloud State's art program.

The 5th Avenue Live! development south of Division Street includes seven new non-dining retail and service businesses, and more are on the way. Thanks to a core of community business leaders and other private and nonprofit partners, this \$70 million development has been responsible for hundreds of construction jobs in recent years and more than 220 new permanent jobs in downtown St. Cloud.

The development also includes the university's Welcome Center and the Coborn Plaza high-amenity residences for our students.

Great work is being done at the Welcome Center, which we refer to as the university's front door. It's an intersection for the community and campus, a place where prospective students can get information and alumni and community groups can gather for meetings and social events. It also houses the Central Minnesota Small Business Development Center, a branch of the Minnesota Trade Office and the Corporate Education and Outreach office which provides professional development training.

Closer to campus, neighborhood groups and university leaders have worked together to enhance security and to beautify the heart of the University neighborhood – Barden Park, St. Cloud's first city park.

The Fifth Avenue revitalization is a physical representation of how the university and the city fit together. St. Cloud was once a community that happened to have a college campus in its midst. Now, this is a community whose hometown university is recognized as integral to its future. The University, for its part, is opening to the community and increasingly focusing its energies on designing academic programs, research and service efforts to address the needs and opportunities in Central Minnesota. Fifth Live! gives form to a shared dream that suggests what we will become as we work together to build the kind of community that will be a great place to work and live for the generations to come.