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Ideas flow for Nussbaum's 'Steelhouse'

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There is no shortage of ideas in the community for how the Nussbaum Center for Entrepreneurship might use a recently donated 225,000-square-foot building next door to its busy business incubator. The hard part may be narrowing down the list of options.

About 60 people - ranging from self-interested entrepreneurs to local officials to people who just love a creative exercise - recently toured the former Carolina Steel Corp. industrial warehouse donated to the Nussbaum Center by Greensboro executives D.H. Griffin Sr. and Jimmy Clark. Griffin, a veteran Triad businessman and entrepreneur himself, was also one of the donors of the Nussbaum Center's main building, which it has occupied since 2012.

The building, now dubbed "the Steelhouse," comes with no strings attached as far as how it is used, and it and the acreage it sits on are big enough to hold several football fields. The only mandate is to use it to promote the incubator's missions of promoting entrepreneurship and economic development, and the goal of the visitors was to generate ideas about how to do that.

"We took everyone on a short tour of the Steelhouse just so they could get a sense of its size," said Pam Cash, the vice chair of the nonprofit incubator's board of directors. "Then we brought them back into the multipurpose room to brainstorm. We purposely didn't spend any time winnowing down the ideas trying to find the best one yet. Our board was specific about wanting to keep it really open-ended at this point."

The results were enlightening, says Sam Funchess, the CEO of the Nussbaum Center. Participants were told that the property might be saved or demolished and could either directly serve the incubator's mission or generate supporting revenue, but there were no budget guidelines dictated.

The most often-mentioned idea was to use the building as some form of sound/film/entertainment venue or studio, Funchess says. Other popular ideas involved using the space for some sort of education partnership facility, or as manufacturing space.

"Vertical farming was one of the interesting ideas," Funchess says, given that nearby agricultural expertise is in abundant supply even while fresh-food-selling grocery stores are rare in the incubator's neighborhood. "This location



COURTESY OF NUSSBAUM CENTER FOR ENTREPRENEURSHIP
Nussbaum Center for Entrepreneurship CEO Sam Funchess (with hand raised) leads a community tour of the sprawling industrial building that has been donated to the nonprofit incubator. The center has been generating ideas for how to use the facility to further its mission. Courtesy of Nussbaum Center for Entrepreneurship

(on South Elm-Eugene Street) is in the heart of one of the worst 'food deserts' in the country, but we've got N.C. A&T's agriculture school right here and the N.C. Biotechnology Center interested in farming techniques. So that was something that could be a viable option."

Matt Evans

Reporter

Triad Business Journal

