Master Plan Steering Committee

Interim report to the Faculty Senate
Shannon Davis, David Wong, and Zachary Schrag
Faculty Senate members of the Master Plan Steering Committee
25 August 2020

Operations and duties of the steering committee

In April 2020, Senior Vice President Carol Kissal announced the that George Mason University would develop a new Master Plan for its Northern Virginia campuses. She constituted a steering committee to represent various university stakeholders. Senate Chair Davis serves on the committee ex officio, and Senators Schrag and Wong were elected to the steering committee by the Senate.

According to its charge, “The Master Plan Steering Committee will assist with master plan progress, review findings and scenarios, act as ambassadors for the plan, and make recommendations to the Leadership Committee.”

The Master Plan Steering Committee has met four times by videoconference: one meeting each in May, June, July, and August. The first three meetings were mainly taken up by the presentation of data by Gregory Janks of Dumont Janks, the firm hired to develop the master plan. The fourth meeting, in August, allowed greater discussion of the work of the committee.

As Dumont Janks develops scenarios and other documents, the steering committee will offer comments before those documents are transmitted to the university’s senior leadership, which will make policy decisions. The committee’s most important recommendations will be made around March 2021, prior to the publication of the plan in May or June.

Committee members are expected to consult with their constituencies as they develop comments on drafts.

Relationship to university principles and goals

Dr. Janks acknowledges that some planning processes begin with general principles, but he prefers to develop principles iteratively, based on factual data and possible scenarios.

Senior leadership has explained that the master plan will not attempt to serve the 2014-2024 Strategic Plan, which was developed under President Cabrera. Rather, the plan will be developed simultaneously and in conjunction with the articulation of the goals of President Washington, including those he outlined to the Board of Visitors in July 2020.¹

Empirical findings

The consultants have assembled a great deal of data, much of which can be found on the Master Plan website: https://www2.gmu.edu/masterplan. Here we note some key findings that may be of particular interest to the Faculty Senate.

Greatest classroom pressure is for specialized spaces

On the Fairfax campus, most classrooms are used 40-50 hours per week, a fairly efficient usage. Arlington classrooms are mostly used after 4:30 pm, and SciTech classrooms have low usage.

The greatest pressure is on specialized spaces: labs and studios. Dumont Janks has also identified a shortage of small rooms, for fewer than 20 people. Overall, they find a deficit of about 15 classrooms in Fairfax, with some surplus in Arlington.

Growth will level off

The master plan commissioned a demographic study from the Demographics Research Group at the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service. That study found that based demographics of Virginia, Mason should expect a leveling off of the rapid student growth of the last 10-15 years. The university may expect to grow from the current 38,000 students to around 43,000 students by 2040. This is a slower growth rate than was projected by earlier models, which anticipated up to 50,000 students by 2029.

Dumont Janks does not expect large online growth, due to the difficulty of entering a market already dominated by first movers, such as Arizona State and Southern New Hampshire.

Fairfax has room for additional buildings

Dumont Janks has identified several sites on the main area of Fairfax campus where new buildings could be built, either on currently vacant sites, in areas now used by surface parking, or to replace low density buildings that are approaching the ends of their useful lives, most notably the original quad buildings (currently named East, Finley, Krug, and West). According to the May 15 presentation, at a floor area ratio (FAR) of 0.8, there is room to build an additional 1,620,800 gross square feet (GSF) of buildings, equivalent to 9 buildings the size of the Engineering Building. Additional spaces are available in Fairfax West, west of Route 123.

SciTech has space to build 10 additional buildings the size of the Engineering Building.

In Arlington, the university may want to buy additional land.

Scenario planning

In coming months, Dumont Janks will develop multiple scenarios, allowing the steering committee and other bodies to consider the pros and cons of each.

The scenarios are for the long-term, and they will assume that the COVID pandemic will be resolved in the next two years, allowing a return to pre-pandemic levels of human contact.

Faculty offices to be discussed

The firm is modeling various possibilities for faculty offices, both private and shared, with sizes of 60, 100 or 120 assignable square feet. The steering committee has not yet discussed this issue in any detail.

SciTech is key

Perhaps the most important question to be decided by the Master Plan is the role of the SciTech campus. Dumont Janks will present a range of scenarios for how that campus could be programmed.