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UniverCity gets first director

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Doug Johnson, vice president of First Western Trust Bank in Fort Collins, has been named the first director for UniverCity Connections, the collaborative effort among downtown, Colorado State University and the city.

The ongoing UniverCity effort, under way for more than a year, is in the process of determining how recommendations from eight subcommittees can become reality.

It will be Johnson's job as of Jan. 1 to prioritize the projects and determine which can be accomplished, said Chip Steiner, executive director of Downtown Development Authority, which will split Johnson's \$80,000 salary with the city, Community Foundation and CSU.

The job tentatively lasts for two years.

"Like anything else, volunteers can only carry something so far before they burn out," Steiner said. "With a paid staff person, there's a switch to keep the herd moving,"

Eight task forces including everything from transit and mobility to homelessness and arts and culture have developed plans to create stronger connections among CSU, Old Town and the Poudre River.

UniverCity is considered to be the area bordered by Prospect Road on the south and Vine Drive to the north and closed in by Shields Street on the west and Lemay Avenue to the east.

Johnson, in a letter to First Western Trust Bank employees and others, said community development has become his calling through the culture created at First Western and Chairman Jim Sprout.

As business development officer, Johnson has been responsible for much of the bank's community development. The initial idea for UniverCity Connections was to hire an administrator to support the task groups as they implement the vision over the next two years, Johnson said.

"That idea evolved into the need for someone to lead the implementation, inspire the task groups and keep the volunteers engaged."

Johnson said it seemed like the perfect opportunity to take a leadership role in what he called a "once-in-a-lifetime" opportunity.

Phase one of the UniverCity project lasted from November 2006 to the end of May, with task force members working in a "visionary process" to strengthen the communities of CSU.

Now it's up to Johnson to bring that vision forward, Steiner said.

Johnson, who grew up in Fort Collins, lives in the boundary area and brings a commitment to the city and the project.

"The guy is deeply committed to Fort Collins," Steiner said. "He is a great networker, effective communicator and one of the hardest working guys I know."

Steiner said Johnson was chosen from among a handful of finalists for the position.

"All around, he's a terrific guy," Steiner said. "We lucked out."

Progressive Old Town Square, 19 Old Town Square, is donating office space for UniverCity.

He'll be running a bare bones operation with an office, but no office help or assistants.

"He'll be a one man band," Steiner said.

Johnson's first job, as Steiner sees it, will be to meet with key UniverCity players including Fort Collins City Manager Darin Atteberry, CSU President Larry Penley, task forces and the implementation committee to narrow down the projects and determine which are most feasible.

Johnson will continue as a shareholder and client at First Western Trust Bank.



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Gordan Thibedeau, left, president of the United Way of Larimer County, shares a laugh Thursday with Doug Johnson, right, vice president of First Western Trust Bank, before the start of the Give 10 Initiative presentation at the Hospice of Larimer County building. Johnson was named director of UniverCity Connections, the collaborative effort among downtown, Colorado State University and the city.

On the Internet
www.univercityconnections.org