

## Prospective hotel promises space, campus prestige

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The silhouette of Auraria's skyline may change noticeably with the addition of a four-star, 200-room hotel.

Slated to be fully operational within the next five years and staffed mostly by Metro's own hospitality students, the hotel is one of several endeavors intended to enhance Metro's academic prestige while capitalizing on Auraria's prime real estate.

Though the hotel would be a flagship venture of one of the major hotel chains, and would be located just across Speer Boulevard from the Denver Center for the Performing Arts, its primary mission would be to house Metro's growing hospitality program, said Metro President Stephen Jordan.

"It would house the classrooms, the offices for the faculty, and would actually become the laboratory for our students," Jordan said. "The concept is that while the hotel senior management would operate it, 80 percent of the labor would actually be our students in the program."

Most of the premiere hospitality programs around the United States operate their own hotels, and having a hotel at Auraria would help bring Metro's program to that next level, Jordan said.

"Over the past 10 years Denver has invested something like \$8 billion in hospitality and tourism, and the Denver metro area is screaming for management-trained staff," said John Dienhart, chair of the Hospitality, Meeting and Travel Administration Department. He added that a hotel on Metro's campus would be the perfect training ground for the growing number of students enrolled in Metro's hospitality program.

"We reached our ceiling last year, having grown from 134 students in 1998 to 340 this past fall. Our facilities are at full capacity, and we cannot have any more students in the program unless we expand," Dienhart said.

An executive summary supporting the idea of a hotel learning center cited Denver International Airport, the Ellie Caulkins Opera House, the art museum expansion, the Convention Center renovation and light-rail expansion as grounds for the project.

"Many universities kill the real estate around them because they focus only internally and then surround themselves with parking structures," said Omar Blaik, president of U3 Ventures, a consulting firm that assists colleges in the development of public/private businesses. "Real estate business markets and cultural venues can be attractive around campuses."

In a Metro Board of Trustees meeting, Jordan said the potential for education-business partnerships are limitless and that a hotel on Speer Boulevard would be a great opportunity to better connect the campus with downtown Denver.

"We have a wonderful program which doesn't really have a place as a laboratory for students," Jordan said in support of a for-profit hotel at Auraria.

Although the exact location of the hotel has yet to be decided, options being discussed include the property on Auraria's east side, including the soccer field and land directly across Speer from the



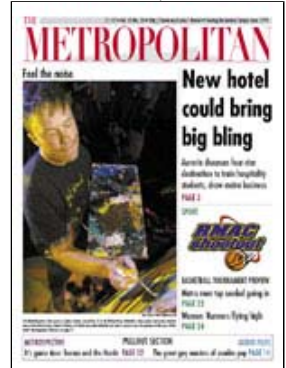
Photo by Heather A. Longway-Burke •  
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A hotel currently under consideration by the Auraria Board of Directors would benefit the American Culinary Federation Apprenticeship Program, which currently uses a kitchen in the Plaza Building. David Roth prepares dishes for the Advanced Cooking class Feb. 26.

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Convention Center.

Dienhart said he has been ruminating on the idea of a hotel learning center since seeing one in operation at the University of Houston in the late '80s.

"I was impressed with their facility. They were teaching, researching and making money. And the faculty and students were having fun," he said.

Dienhart added that although a similar program at Princess Anne College in Maryland lost \$200,000 in its first year of operation, he feels that Auraria's metropolitan location will make the difference.

"At Princess Anne it was difficult getting students in the program, and the college's location was not appropriate to bring in conventions," he said, adding that he realized it was going to take a metro area like Denver's to create a successful hotel learning center.

"I don't know of a city more hospitable or more centrally located than Denver," Dienhart said. Speculated to cost about \$25 million to build the hotel and \$10 million for the additional teaching facilities, the project is tentatively set for completion within three to five years.

Although \$35 million may seem indulgent for a campus now operating at a loss of \$3,921,209 and paying about \$4 million in debt interest alone, Dienhart defends the project.

"The Hyatt Regency refinanced in '06, and I believe they have already almost paid off their refinance debt," he said, adding that he is confident that a student-run hotel will be financially and educationally successful.

"This will tie us more into the convention business ... we need to do this," he said.

Not yet in the hard planning stage, the project is expected to be funded partially by one or more of the business owners on the hospitality department's Industry Advisory Board.

"We already have a private investor, someone on the advisory board who believes in the project," Dienhart said, adding that although not finalized, enlisting the help of one or more investors will be the only way for Metro to build the hotel. "We will have to acquire funds by selling bonds to private investors."

The current plan calls for a full-purpose hotel, including a multipurpose conference center with full production capabilities, amphitheater-style classrooms and living quarters for 40 junior and senior hospitality students. The plans also include a beverage management center with wine cellar, beer and spirits production and service facilities.

"Lots of people overlook Metro," said hospitality major Christina Davis, who will graduate in May 2007. "It always amazes me that most students don't even know Metro has a hospitality program, and I think having a hotel will be a great opportunity for Metro students to shine. I just wish the hotel was built while I was attending Metro."

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