

Students add fresh eyes to Salem's priorities for the future

By Beth Casper

Special to the Statesman Journal

October 11, 2010

The city of Salem is harnessing the untapped resources of university students for a year's worth of work that could change the face of downtown and beyond.

Oregon students offer alternative for Salem's park connections, Willamette River waterfront, civic center, an affordable-housing project and more in an effort to propel the city's paper priorities to on-the-ground realities.

From now until June, 600 students from the University of Oregon and Portland State University will be tackling 14 major projects in Salem.

It's part of an innovative program, the Sustainable City Year, designed to provide real-world work and hands-on learning for students and, in turn, generate dozens of ideas, reports and design plans for city staff. The focus is on economic, environmental and social sustainability.

Founded three years ago, the program turns its attention to one Oregon city each year in a competitive process.

Salem's projects will be part of about 30 courses taught by 25 faculty members. The courses range from architecture and public policy to business and law.

"The idea is to push things along," said Chris Jones, co-manager of the Sustainable City Year at the University of Oregon. "Sometimes in a city, in a government, things get stuck. Our plan is to push things along and get things unstuck."

Every course will provide city staff with some kind of document — from architectural drawings to professional posters. Much of the research will be presented at city council work sessions.



Timothy J. Gonzalez | Statesman Journal
Salem police Lt. Scott Hayes gives a tour Wednesday to architecture students from the University of Oregon as part of the Sustainable City Year program. The students are helping with the city's sustainability projects.

Salem's 14 projects

University of Oregon and Portland State University students will work on 14 major projects in Salem as part of the Sustainable City Year program. They are:

Redeveloping the area south of Mission Street SE: Design guidelines for transition area between downtown and residential area.

North downtown waterfront redevelopment: Design concepts for opportunity sites in area between River and Broadway, north of Union; and identify barriers to redevelopment.

Orchard Village green community integration: Create a development plan for 2.87-acre Orchard Village site, between

"A lot of the work is generating ideas and possibilities and raising issues," said Sustainable City Year co-manager Amy Hause. "Sort of like a massive brainstorming for the city on how to approach problems."

University of Oregon staff estimate that Salem will receive 80,000 hours of faculty-supervised multidisciplinary student coursework. The city will spend about \$345,000 for the collaboration. Some of the funds will go toward the fixed costs to operate the Sustainable City Year program and things like field trips.

But most of the city's investment will be used to pay students hired at the end of the term to prepare the final reports summarizing all of the students' ideas. The cost for the service is estimated at between \$3.50 and \$5.50 an hour for the hired students, compared to \$100 to \$200 an hour for a consultant, according to city staff.

"All of this study or planning or input would cost us thousands of thousands of thousands of dollars if we hired engineers, consultants and architects," said Salem Mayor Janet Taylor. "A fresh look by graduates in many disciplines of education is priceless. It may help us to accelerate our ability to accomplish some goals we have had for a long time."

A civic center and police facility redesign is one such goal.

In 2009, a city council subcommittee directed staff to produce a police bond measure to build a new police facility in the civic center. But Salem doesn't have the budget and resources to move that goal along right now.

With the help of two upper-level architecture courses and a firm hired by the city to work with the students, staff will be much closer to actual designs for the facility.

"It's a lot of money (a police facility bond measure)," Taylor said. "It's not something you easily go out and ask for. But when you have a really good in-depth study of what could or couldn't be done, it gives you a foundation to build on to get community support."

For another project, students in five different courses will focus on encouraging redevelopment of properties in north downtown along the riverfront — in the area between the river and Broadway Street NE, north of Union Street NE.

"We are curious about why this area is not redeveloping," said Courtney Knox, a project manager in the city's urban development department. "We want the students to identify the barriers to redevelopment so that the city's urban renewal department can make changes to spur development."

Salem Parkway and Shangri Lane Ave. NE, adjacent private property and infill options for other Salem Housing Authority multifamily properties.

Civic center and police facility: Create two to three design concepts for new police facility and civic center redesign. Student work is fed by and feeds professional architect effort to prepare conceptual design of new police facility and reuse of civic center.

Downtown parks connectivity: Create a single integrated parks connectivity plan for Wallace, Riverfront, Minto-Brown, Bush's Pasture Park, via existing and future trail connections.

Restoration of Minto-Brown Island area: Create an interpretive trails plan to connect the approximately 160 acres of restoration area with the existing 900-acre Minto-Brown Island Park.

Integrating Riverfront Park with Pringle Creek: Design concepts for Pringle Creek trail connection.

Economic prosperity strategic action plan: Develop a community-based five-year economic prosperity strategic action plan that includes goals, objectives, actions and performance metrics.

Another class will examine the opportunities for redevelopment along the Willamette River waterfront south of Mission Street SE to Owens Street S.

Two other classes will work to connect Salem's core area parks with a system of urban trails and bicycle routes.

The reports and architectural designs will be studied by city staff or independent consultants and tweaked based on the public's feedback. In many cases, the ideas won't be implemented for five to 10 years.

For some of the projects, a "fix" or design isn't the goal — it's the in-depth look at an area that is the most beneficial.

For example, city staff also identified downtown traffic circulation as one of the major priorities for the city. Students will develop alternatives to the existing one-way transportation grid and test the impact of those alternatives on downtown traffic circulation, capacity, timing of signals and queuing.

It's not that the city's traffic engineers couldn't do this work — it's that it is so time-consuming to examine all the "what-ifs."

"The results from this course are not going to result in panacea," said Knox, also the city's liaison for the Sustainable City Year. "It's just some great research and data to help us understand how changes to some intersections affect other areas."

But the benefit of the Sustainable City Year is hardly summed up in the research, plans and reports Salem will receive from each class.

In Gresham, which was the program's inaugural city last year, the students impacted city staff far more than the city's built environment.

"City staff got a charge out of the new energy and excitement and learning from the students," said Laura Bridges, communications director for the city of Gresham.

It turned out that having young, enthusiastic people running around Gresham made city staff excited to come to work and apply a whole new way of thinking.

Beth Casper can be reached at bethanncasper@hotmail.com.

Market analysis: Create a supply chain, business cluster and market analysis for renewable energy product manufacturing, food processing, metal manufacturing or other clusters.

Industrial byproduct reuse: Recommend ways to reuse byproducts of the biofuel process, food processing and at the Willow Lake Wastewater Treatment Facility.

Civic engagement strategy: Create a civic engagement strategy to include new technology and broader participation in decision making; create a multimedia field guide mapping cultural resources in North Salem.

Downtown traffic circulation: Conduct an analysis of alternatives to one-way transportation grid, and test effects of those alternatives.

Parking standards: Review parking standards for mixed-use areas in other communities and create standards for Salem.

City attorney externship: A law school student will work in the city attorney's