

Students Provide Communities with Planning Assistance

Do you have a planning project but limited resources? At a recent orientation meeting for Land Policy Educators, Carol Townsend, Extension Educator with Kent/MSU Extension, shared her experience of working with students from the Urban and Regional Planning Program at Michigan State University. “I’ve found the Urban Planning Partnerships program to be great for connecting good community planning projects to the practicum class,” she told her audience. “It’s been a resource for neighborhoods in Grand Rapids. I now have people calling me and asking for students because of the track record they have here.”

Urban Planning Partnerships is the outreach arm of the Urban and Regional Planning Program of Michigan State University. Zenia Kotval is co-director of the Partnerships program, which helps connect communities with students to work on a “real world” planning project.

“It’s a capstone course called the Planning Practicum, and all our students are required to take it just before they graduate,” said Kotval. “The focus of our program is to educate and provide practical training for our future urban planners, planning directors, and economic development directors, and other community-based planning professionals.

“We try to find a very good match between communities and the students, so they actually get real-life experience. We work with Extension agents and any Michigan community with a planning project that can be undertaken by four to six students within a semester. We select projects in a competitive process, since we only take about six projects into the classroom each year. Our projects range from Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies to site-specific reuse studies.”

The students are guided by two faculty members. “We give the student in-class guidance, and we ask the clients to be mentors in the field. As you can well imagine, a group of students going into a community is not always easy, so the mentor in the field is important for them.”

The students work with the client to develop a scope of services for the project, much as a client would do with a consulting team. They work out the necessary methodology, and then students go out into the community to collect the data. They analyze it, and complete a professional-quality report. Students make a campus presentation of their findings and recommendations, and a presentation to the community, if one is desired.

“We find that the students are great at the data portion, but sometimes a little naïve about political will and capacity when it comes to implementation,” says Kotval. “But that’s for the mentor and the community to do, really. The students represent no special interests and are seen as non-threatening researchers, because they don’t have agendas and are doing this as an academic team, and the community is getting an objective and

professional product at the end of it.”

Kotval reports that the program has had great success across the state, in a wide variety of communities. “We’ve done feasibility studies in communities of 2,000 people and cities as large as Detroit.”

On occasion, students in the practicum work in cooperation with other students in other programs. “Landscape Architecture has their own practicum, and we sometimes dovetail with them if a project requires design skills as well as data and planning skills,” says Kotval. “For example, we worked together on a St. Johns downtown project. Our students did the planning practicum, and then the design concepts were done by Landscape Architecture students.”

The practicum has been part of the Urban and Regional Planning curriculum for five decades, but for the past five years Urban Planning Partnerships has worked to make the process much more streamlined and useful for the clients and community partners. Urban Planning Partnerships is coordinated through MSU Urban Collaborators, an Extension-sponsored program supporting urban revitalization efforts in several of Michigan’s core cities.

PAL grantees and Michigan municipalities of all sizes that might be interested in engaging students to provide planning technical assistance can find information about the program, case studies of work completed, and contact information on the Partnerships Web site at www.ssc.msu.edu/~urp/outreach/upp.htm.

New Land Policy Educators Receive Orientation

The Michigan State University Land Policy Institute has hired four Land Policy Educators, who will expand the capacity of MSU Extension to strengthen the infrastructure in land use, policy formation, and community and regional development. A fifth will soon be hired. As were ported in the November/December issue of the PAL Update, the purpose of the new educators is to:

- Provide education on land use issues to the general public, commissioners, and community volunteers
- Serve as instructors in the Citizen Planner Program
- Facilitate the land use dialog in their communities

The Land Policy Educators (LPEs) received a full-day orientation on January 31 in East Lansing. This event featured presentations by Soji Adelaja, director of the Land Policy Program; Mark Wyckoff, president of the Planning and Zoning Center; Wayne Beyea, statewide coordinator of the Citizen Planner Program; Carol Townsend and Kendra Wills of United Growth in Kent County; Tom Coon, director of MSU Extension; and Pat Norris, extension specialist in land use. Bil IRustem, president and CEO of Public Sector Consultants, gave a luncheon presentation on the goals and challenges of land use in Michigan.

“The Land Policy Educators program, part of PAL, is a unique program in the country. It educates, supports, and empowers local communities to develop effective land use programs that improve the lives of Michigan people,” said Soji Adelaja.

In his luncheon remarks, Bill Rustem provided a broad view of land use efforts in Michigan. “There is a lot of common ground in Michigan,” he said. “Nobody wants to lose our farms. Everybody wants our cities to be strong. Nobody wants our races to be divided. We can make things better by doing things better, by improving our decision making process.”

The current network of Land Policy Educators will provide a foundation for land use education and facilitation across southern Michigan. With the success of this network, the Land Policy Institute plans to leverage funding for additional positions in other regions of the state.

Below is the list of new Land Policy Educators, with one yet to be hired for Lapeer County.

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Planning & Zoning Center Has New Home

This spring, the Planning & Zoning Center will move from its Lansing location to the campus of Michigan e University within the Land Policy Institute, fostering sustainability of the center’s work. Wyckoff, president of the center, has been appointed senior associate

director of the Land Policy Institute. He will continue to serve as director of the Planning & Zoning Center at Michigan State University, and he will remain as editor of the Planning & Zoning News. Wyckoff can be reached at Wyckoff@pzcenter.com.

Simon Announces Land Policy Institute

In her remarks to open the Planning for Prosperity Summit on the campus of Michigan State University on March 27, MSU President Lou Anna K. Simon announced that the Land Policy Program led by Dr. Soji Adelaja had become the Land Policy Institute. “With this change, the Land Policy Institute will have a permanent nature in the university structure that will last beyond any of us,” she said. “This will also sustain the interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary purpose of the institute that has such power, I believe, in the programs you’re going to talk about today.”

In the Spotlight

In any encounter, Heaster Wheeler’s energy and knowledge about issues critical to Michigan are certain to get your attention. In the dialog about land use issues and questions about Michigan’s economy, his perspective cuts through much of the standard conversation in ways that inspire fresh thinking. It’s a perspective that offers straight talk about race, and a unique awareness of our collective moment in history.

“I understand that farmland preservation is just as important to folks who live in exurbia and rural Michigan as urban revitalization is to me,” he says. “But the unfortunate part is that we are so severely divided that we’re not having a conversation about the things we have in common, and those of us who don’t talk well together will not work well together. That’s at the expense of the greater good – and the whole ship sinks.”

That ship, Michigan, is deeply tied to the fate of Detroit, a city that’s as much the mental gateway to Michigan as Denver and Minneapolis are the signature cities for their states. “People aren’t thinking about west Michigan when they think of Michigan. They think Detroit. That’s something significant, and we have to recognize that and celebrate that if we want to attract young people and turn a lot of things around,” says Wheeler.

He finds it disturbing that everybody thinks about Colorado when they think of skiing, and they think about Minneapolis when they think about a region that works. “But here Detroit is, just two hours from ski resorts and snowboarding, two hours from world-class trout fishing and beautiful rivers and lakes,” he says, “while at the same time Detroit is a city rich in architecture, music, sports, and entertainment. We also have a riverfront that is being revitalized by the Detroit Riverfront Conservancy, and so much more. We need to celebrate all that and change the way people think about Detroit and Michigan.”

Wheeler says we also have to recognize and celebrate the diversity of Detroit. “You can’t pick up a brochure about tourism in southeast Michigan, for example, and see no black people. If our state was able to unify around a sporting event like the Super Bowl, we can

certainly identify some overarching principles that carry over into how we think of Michigan.

“For one week, we showed the world a vitality about Detroit that is real, and we must build on that. We have to continue to pound the message that to save our farms we have to save our cities. While doing all that, we cannot ignore poverty, and we cannot ignore the availability of workforce housing, affordable housing. We need transportation. We must connect people to opportunities.”

Read any newspaper in the U.S., and you’ll see that the Super Bowl was clearly a jump-start to putting Michigan and Detroit back on the road to prosperity. Wheeler fully appreciates that. “We’ve got to continue to reinvent ourselves, we’ve got to continue to retool, and we’ve got to continue to reinvest. I agree that we’ve depended on the auto industry for too long, but we still have a large population center, so we have to re-engineer it.

“And most of the challenges that this large urban center faces cannot be solved by the mayor of the city alone. It has to be a collaborative effort, and that’s when business leaders, community leaders, education leaders, and elected officials all have a responsibility to face this challenge. We have to continue pushing toward that special moment of convergence when all of those forces come together, like the Super Bowl. It was a moment of convergence.

“To make that happen again we have to make a basic, long-term commitment to communicate, and to be respectful of our differences. Blacks and whites start in different places because of our different experiences. Blacks often start from a place where they do not trust whites. And whites often start from a place where they may fear blacks. Distrust and fear.

“Race relations and diversity need to be woven into our educational curriculum – third grade, seventh grade, eleventh grade. We need to be educating our next generation about race and racism and race relations, and history as it relates to race.”

Wheeler’s call to make race a central topic in our educational curriculum echoes author James Loewen’s “Lies My Teacher Told Me.” Loewen’s analysis of the 12 most common history textbooks used in American high schools found that the subject of slavery was ignored in some and received no more than a paragraph in others. The result is widespread ignorance about forces still shaping society. As Wheeler says, “A lot of people want to start in the wrong place without going back to the root cause, and that makes it very easy to blame the victim. If you don’t go back to all the psychological scars of slavery – that was a 250-year institution that just ended in 1863, just 143 years ago – you’ll blame the victim.

“How can the world celebrate the lives and contributions of Rosa Parks and Coretta Scott King, and we here in Michigan not embrace diversity? History will forever revere their contributions, but if you want to repair race relations, it’s easier to learn how to repair a

furnace. There's no place to go to repair race relations. There's no form for that. No Web site you can go to. No handbook. No class on it. But we've got to get there.

“Rosa Parks’ act of courage was, in historical terms, a Kyros moment,” says Wheeler. “It was a moment when divine intervention and history and political will come together. I believe what we’re looking for herein Michigan is that Kyros moment, that place where political will, divine intervention, and the right person at the right time come together. We’re still looking for that.

“At the end of the day, we all want the same thing. I want my children to get the best education possible. I want to be able to sleep comfortably at night without concern. I want to be able to take my family out for an evening of fun. I want baseball, apple pie, and a Chevrolet,” Wheeler chuckles. “And we can all have those things a lot more quickly if we have the conversations we need to have – in school, at home, around every boardroom table.”

Cost Sharing Puts One City in the Black

Nearly every city in Michigan is suffering financially from lost revenue sharing and other ills. But the City of DeWitt, just north of Lansing, is in the enviable position of being at least a quarter million dollars in the black. With a population of just over 4,700, DeWitt has grown by a mere 800 residents in the past 10 years, so it's not growth that has created the surplus. Mayor Paul Opsommer attributes much of the surplus to cost sharing.

“We’ve had really no large developments in the city in the last 10 years,” said Opsommer. He believes that a good part of the \$250,000 or more surplus in the city’s \$3.5 million budget has derived from the savings that come from sharing services such as the fire department with two nearby townships. DeWitt also streamlined city government, which now stands at 17 employees, down from 21.

Opsommer says the city also saved nearly \$100,000 by merging its parks department with those of nearby DeWitt Township and the school district. “We had competing parks and rec services, which created lots of redundancy. Joining them together has to be one of the most successful things we have done in the years I’ve been mayor.”

Cross-jurisdictional planning has been something DeWitt and its neighbors have been working on for some time. “I think we’ve been pretty successful, and it’s something we’re proud of,” Opsommer said. “But like a family relationship, it’s something you work on all the time.”

DeWitt officials meet regularly with township officials in different ways. The fire authority and parks and recreation authorities meet on at least a monthly basis, and have created a joint authority. Mayor Opsommer also meets with the township supervisors on a regular basis. “That’s not a formal meeting in an office, but usually over coffee, and we talk. We’re always exploring other ways to share services.”

Certified planning officials have been part of the success story. DeWitt Township has a full-time certified planner, Jeff Gray, and the city works with Rob Nesbitt, of LSL Planning, who serves as an outside consultant working with the city's administrator and with the mayor. Opsommer believes these resources have helped the city and townships work together on cost savings.

"I'm a firm believer that cooperation amongst municipalities is a way for everyone to win," said Opsommer. "Our parks and rec authority is offering more programs, more classes, and more activities than we've ever dreamed possible. And we're actually doing it for less money."

The overall success of DeWitt's cross-jurisdictional planning also is owed to relationship-building outside of formal channels. "Rick Galardi, the DeWitt Township supervisor, has been marvelous to work with. I'm fortunate that he sees exactly the win-win situation that I do. We talked for six to eight months just getting to know and trust each other before we tried to do some things."

Opsommer believes that the public wants that kind of cooperation, and he's encouraged that residents are beginning to catch on to the benefits of having working relationships that go beyond the boundaries of municipalities. "For example, voters in Watertown Township voted to join our library district. We're seeing people come before the council and the township trustees and saying, 'now that you're getting along, can we do this?' That's wonderful. They're starting to do some of the thinking, because they see the win-win possibilities."

The DeWitt city budget is due June 1. In the meantime, the city council will be considering its options relative to its surplus. Mayor Opsommer envisions three options: 1) reduce the millage rate by one or two mills; 2) issue rebate checks to residents; 3) save the money and wait another year. He believes the city council will find it prudent to wait to see what the state legislature does about revenue sharing before it makes a decision.

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