

Class act

Oregon towns in need of regeneration have tapped the talent and enthusiasm of local students, writes **April Dembosky**



EDUCATION SUSTAINABLE CITIES INITIATIVE



Sustainable future: Springfield is looking to turn the Booth-Kelly mill into flexible spaces

The red smokestacks that form the backdrop to downtown Springfield, Oregon, are symbols of a bygone era, a bygone economy. Some locals say the chimneys of the town's last paper mill inspired the visual signature of the fictionalised Springfield in the opening credits of *The Simpsons*, the television cartoon show – representing not just the culture of Every City, US, but the economic and environmental ills that have come to plague one-industry towns.

Springfield, Oregon, once thrived on lumber production. But jobs have been pruned after environmental battles and policy changes sharply curbed the cutting of the state's pine and Douglas fir trees.

It is a history that Courtney Griesel, the city's economic development analyst, wants to preserve and correct. As she oversees the redevelopment of the abandoned, polluted Booth-Kelly mill, she is looking for a design that is environmentally and economically sustainable. She wants a space that celebrates the city's timber heritage but also looks several economic cycles into the future.

"My fear is we will create the same problem for the next generation," she says. "I don't want to make every decision in the moment. We want to encourage people to build flexible spaces."

For help with her vision, Griesel turned to students at the University of Oregon in neighbouring Eugene. Dozens of students in city planning, architecture, public policy, economics and other departments used Springfield as a real-life testing ground for theories learned in class.

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Students produced drawings and analyses for a revamped Booth-Kelly mill, and drafted designs for new roads, a school and a library. They gave presentations to the city council and answered questions from the public.

"What the students present is conceptual. It is the start of a conversation," says Bob Choquette, the director of the Sustainable Cities Initiative, the university programme that organises the student effort. "An architectural firm will give you one design. Here, you can engage 15 students and you get a variety of ideas to choose from."

For this service, Springfield paid the university \$229,000 – a hefty sum for a cash-strapped

city, but Griesel says the city spends the same amount on a single contract with a professional consultant. While some ideas were not politically or economically feasible, and just a few were brilliant, most contained nug-

gets of insight the city will piece together as it finalises its plans.

That was the original goal of Marc Schlossberg, professor of planning and public policy at the University of Oregon, who helped create the programme three years ago. He saw too many final papers at the end of the semester with great ideas that no one else would ever see.

"What a waste all these great ideas are being put on paper and kept inside these walls," he says, motioning to his office's book-lined walls. "If people in the community could have access to these ideas, it could reorientate how they see their problems."

Schlossberg and a group of other professors struck a deal to experiment with the city of

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‘Students are incredibly desperate to make change happen now’



Gresham, outside Portland, and incorporate applied projects into their curriculum. The student work was so well received that, the following year, several cities competed for the opportunity to work with students. Salem, the state capital, won and agreed to pay \$350,000. Springfield signed up the following year.

Now, dozens of universities are calling Schlossberg wanting to replicate the programme. As debates continue about the cost of higher education, universities must defend their relevance.

“We see this as a way of updating higher education for the modern era,” says Schlossberg. “We can’t be happy in our ivory tower any more. The community is asking what we are contributing. Students are incredibly desperate to make change happen now. They want to learn by doing.”

The programme has created some tension with professional groups, which fear their city contracts are being usurped by students. The Salem chapter of the American Institute of Architects objected to the student

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collaboration at first. City officials tried to appease the consultants by playing down the contributions as “just student work”. At the same time, they called it “on a par with profes-

sionals” to justify spending tax dollars to the city council and the community. At the end of the year, the professional architects won a contract to design a new police station using drafts from the students.

That project would not have happened without the students, says Linda Norris, Salem’s city manager. “The city had been cutting staff since 2008,” she says. “I was concerned about how we were going to achieve a number of goals we had set with the limited resources we had.”

The students propelled them forward more than three years,

Slices of history: the Booth-Kelly mill in its heyday and a proposed new look

she says, helping design new energy-efficient street lights, bicycle lanes, park signage and new uses for the wastewater treatment plant that saved the city \$400,000.

The students recognised that the plant had capacity for processing much more waste than was then passing through. Since the local fruit canneries had lost business to food producers in South America, they produced much less waste water. The students suggested the city solicit waste from businesses in nearby regions and charge to process it.

“The students got us away from thinking we were just here to do one thing,” says Greg Eyerly, the city’s wastewater treatment manager. His team is now working on technology to transform sewage into fuel for the city’s police vehicle fleet. “We want to take it from the toilet tank to the gas tank.”

The university has yet to decide which city it will focus on in the next academic year. It will soon run out of cities in the state that can afford the annual fee, so it is considering focusing on implementing some of the proposals it proposed in the first three cities, such as the Booth-Kelly mill site in Springfield.

But if one local business owner had his way, the students would help him develop an economic plan to exploit the city’s rumoured Simpsons connection – a title vied for by Springfields in 11 other states.

Jack Koehler, the owner of Sweety’s candy and frozen yoghurt shop, wants to turn his street into a six-block “Simpsonville”, a tourist strip that takes a decorative cue from the yellow paint of his store and the life-sized plastic figures of the Simpson family he has set up outside.

“I want to cartoon this area up,” he says. “Let’s capitalise.” ■