

University-city partnership to expand across U.S.

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By Beth Casper

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The university-city partnership that created hundreds of ideas for the future growth of Salem is expanding to universities throughout the country.

Faculty and officials from more than 22 universities traveled to Oregon to learn how to replicate the Sustainable City Year, an innovative program between the University of Oregon and one city in Oregon in which students work on real-world problems. The university partnered with Salem last year.

Sustainable City Year faculty were back in Salem on Thursday, remembering the results of hundreds of hours of work to find better biking paths through the city, enhance Minto-Brown Island Park, design a bigger police station, create more energy-efficient affordable housing units and other projects.

The university representatives — from places such as Arizona State, Missouri State, University of San Francisco, University of Iowa, University of North Carolina, Penn State and University of Minnesota — were visibly impressed.

“The expectation of our graduates is to bring theory to practice,” said Nancy Murray, an academic dean at The Evergreen State College. “This program does that.”

Sustainable City Year coordinates service learning across 40 disciplines and 75 courses. Typical service learning projects at universities happen in a piecemeal fashion, driven by the interest of the professors or an enterprising student.

Sarah Dooling of the University of Texas at Austin said she planned to write a thank-you letter to her dean for sending her to this workshop. Dooling said she was impressed with the breadth of service learning within the Sustainable City Year program.

“It’s about the benefit associated with bringing 10 classes to look at a particular issue,” she said.

Salem city staffers provided example after example of how the students’ work benefited the Salem community.

“We have 18 social media sites for the city of Salem,” said Mike Gotterba, the public

information officer at the city of Salem. “There is a social media policy for the city of Salem. We are using Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. We didn’t have this stuff before Sustainable Cities. SCI helped us a lot and got us there quicker than we would have otherwise.”

Salem’s engineering program manager Allen Dannen worked with architecture students to design a new building for police headquarters. The students brought an energy that city staffers admired, he said.

“I quickly realized that I would have to start drinking a lot more caffeine to be able to keep up with the students, who have a lot of energy,” Dannen said, laughing.

Their work resulted in the city hiring consultants to propel the police facility project forward.

Graduate students in another course proposed an alternative way for the city of fund its 11,000 streetlights, which cost the city \$1.6 million each year for electricity, maintenance and replacement.

Mark Bechtel, Salem’s parks and transportation services manager, held up a copy of the students’ report.

“Notice how dog eared it is,” he said. “This is extremely relevant. We were so confident with accuracy of this report that we had them present this to City Council. I wrote a staff report ... on these options. I would like nothing more than for our City Council to adopt an alternative funding method for our streetlights.”

Courtney Knox, the city’s project manager for the program, told the visiting faculty that the students gave the city far more than what staffers expected — in every case. Minto-Brown Island Park is a perfect example, she said.

“Minto Island is a 900-acre park, and sometimes people get lost,” she said. “We wanted some wayfinding so people wouldn’t get lost. We got a foundation for a master plan to transform the park. It is amazing.”

But in addition to all of the reports that the students created for the city, their real gift was intangible, Knox said.

Knox said the students energized city staffers, brought renewed pride in the community and breathed life into projects that were stagnant.

“We received millions of little gems in all of this work that we are still discovering,” Knox said. “This is going to impact us for a long time.”