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NEWS LOCAL NEWS

SPRINGFIELD

UO students present visions for downtown Springfield, including public plaza

MULTIMEDIA PHOTO



University of Oregon architecture students Tessa Crespo (left), Sebas Oviedo and Nicole Ghiselli put up drawings of their visions for downtown Springfield during an open house at the Springfield City Hall. (Chris Pietsch/The Register-Guard)

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SPRINGFIELD — Fifteen University of Oregon architecture students spent almost three months dreaming up possibilities for downtown.

Most of the students displayed their final visions Tuesday in the lobby of City Hall as part of the UO's Sustainable City Year Program, which promotes education, service, public outreach and research on the design and development of sustainable cities.

Tessa Crespo, 22, said her team went through 300 designs before arriving at their plan for downtown.

When pressed, she said that might have been an exaggeration, but they spent a lot of time researching, and there was “a lot of trial and error.”

“We were all more creative than we ever thought we would be because of all of the constraints,” Crespo said.

Those constraints included working within a budget, working with existing structures and uses and following the City Council-approved Downtown District Urban Design Plan.

At the beginning of fall term, city staff members visited the students' urban design studio and presented the Downtown District Urban Design Plan and answered questions about it.

The city hired Portland-based urban design firm Crandall Arambula's to create the plan as a strategy to revitalize downtown.

One of the key components that Crandall Arambula advocated for — and a public process confirmed the desire to have — is an open-air plaza at Mill and Main streets. The plaza, usable year-round, would connect downtown to the Willamette River.

"We've been doing a lot of talking about this plaza," said management analyst Courtney Griesel, who was one of the city's liaisons with the students. "Having pictures helps the public think creatively about what they envision" for their city.

Five teams of three worked together on the projects, and four of the final projects were on display with their drawings pinned to black backdrops taller than the students.

Several groups thought the plaza on the Crandall Arambula design was too large for Springfield, even factoring in population growth.

Crespo's group, which also includes Nicole Ghiselli, 21, and Regan Greenhill, 22, decided to make the plaza smaller and use some of the space for parking.

Within the plaza they included two amphitheaters with ramps for accessibility and stairs. The larger one would be appropriate for community gatherings and concerts, while the smaller one would be more comfortable for a quiet lunch.

They also created a promenade down to the river, with many spaces for sitting and socializing.

Their total concept involved developing districts for housing, food, arts, business, industrial use and the river.

Veronika Jonsson, 22, and Amanda McCaffrey, 21, also divided their map of downtown into districts, each "node" tailored to a different use. Their regional node focused on the landscape, river and water. The metropolitan node focused on public transportation and included nightlife. A third node was centered around the Washburne neighborhood and families.

"It was a different way of problem-solving," Jonsson said. "When you see a city, everything is so dynamic and interwoven."

Mayor Christine Lundberg stopped to get a closer look at Jonsson and McCaffrey's project.

"I think they are pretty fabulous," Lundberg said of the designs. "I'm very impressed with everything. It's a lot of hard work."

Griesel, the city analyst, said many of the ideas could come into play down the line when the city is ready to move on projects and hires architects.

Right now the city is focused on buying property downtown, but the city could apply student ideas for crosswalk treatments and other less expensive things as soon as nine months from now.

"It helps you reimagine what's possible," Griesel said. "They held true to the principles of what the community really wanted."

John Helmer, 55, of Eugene, spent a good amount of time browsing the displays and asking students questions. He said he has been watching both Eugene and Springfield struggle with their downtowns for 25 years.

He wondered about the plaza concept. "I'm not sure that's the right spot," he said. "It feels like a reach."

Helmer said he thought it was a great idea to include the students in the process.

"There certainly are some interesting ideas here," he said.

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