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U offering cities a new partnership to solve problems

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It's a dilemma that cities grapple with statewide and nationwide: an aging population and other significant demographic changes, but also tighter budgets and smaller staffs to tackle "to do" lists.

Cue the next generation.

This year, dozens of graduate students at the University of Minnesota are trading classrooms for City Hall, working alongside the city staff in Minnetonka to dig up new solutions to issues -- from conserving water to attracting more mid-priced housing for younger families.

It's part of a program the university is testing in Minnetonka this year before expanding it statewide. The program, which officially starts Friday, is designed to help cities better respond to changes and sustainability problems and also to give students real-world experience.

While the university often collaborates with cities and counties, the yearlong project takes that to a new level, giving about 130 students the rare task of working together across multiple departments from law to civil engineering.

"It's really at a scope and scale we don't typically see at a university," said program manager Mike Greco, who works for the U's Center for Urban and Regional Affairs.

"It was a way to scale up the work the university does. And that benefits both sides [the city and school]."

It's one of a few programs in the country modeled after one started at the University of Oregon in 2009. In October, other Minnesota cities can apply to be in the program for next year.

For U faculty members and students, the benefit of the program is clear: learn about sustainability beyond a trendy buzzword, to real-world work.

Making a difference

In this year's pilot of the Resilient Communities Project, students from 10 different courses are paired with Minnetonka staff members in 17 initiatives ranging from urban planning to water conservation.

In one class, law students will explore storm-water management and help the city draft new regulations.

Another class will work one-on-one with city staffers to explore how to work better with condo associations and form neighborhood identities as is done in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

In the spring, a class will explore the idea of starting rooftop gardens.

"These aren't just projects that make the city look good, but projects that make a difference," Greco said.

In Jean King's class, graduate students will look back at contentious development projects and track down residents who opposed them initially to see how or if their feelings changed, then present the results to the City Council.

"It ups the ante," King said. "Now you're not just writing a paper for a professor, but making a presentation to people who



Susan Thomas, who is the principal trainer for the city of Minnetonka, talked to graduate students from the University of Minnesota who are moving their studies this year from the classroom to City Hall.

Richard Sennott, Star Tribune

could change things."

For graduate students Choua Her, 32, of St. Paul and Allyson Candee, 32, of Minneapolis it's the first time they've had a project outside campus.

"It's a nice opportunity to take what we're learning in the classroom to the real world," Candee said.

For the city staff, the list of 17 projects would've been done anyway but taken longer and been less detailed, Community Development Director Julie Wischnack said. Plus, she said, grad students bring fresh perspective and the latest expertise to problems.

"We're able to be on the cutting edge of this research," she said.

Minnetonka gets the extra help free this year. But in the future, the university hopes to offset costs by charging cities, Greco said, encouraging them to get grants or funding from partners such as park districts.

Bring your A-game

That's what the University of Oregon does, charging cities \$250,000 to \$350,000 a year. Spokesman Bob Choquette said many of the cities use money already dedicated to projects that students help with or get grants.

Since 2009, the project has morphed into a nationally known program involving 450 students across the Oregon campus.

One measure of its worth to cities: In 2010, students found that a product going into a local landfill could make natural gas instead, saving the city of Salem an estimated \$400,000 a year.

"They have to bring their A-game," Choquette said of students. "They're not just talking to professors but people in the community."

This year, the Oregon program is being replicated in Minnesota and two to three other schools across the nation.

In Minnetonka, Wischnack is already encouraging other cities to get involved next year.

"It's really all-inclusive," she said. "It's a once-in-a-great-time opportunity to get some really effective and efficient work."

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