

Medford parks officials get help from UO students

Business class is working on plans to manage costs, attract more to programs, make them more accessible

By **Nicole Ginley-Hidinger**
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As the Medford Parks and Recreation Department makes plans to build three new baseball/softball fields at U.S. Cellular Community Park, it also is making sure there will be adequate revenue to operate them.

The parks department is getting help with the latter planning from Prof. Beth Hjelm's 12-student Capstone Business Strategy and Planning class from the University of Oregon.

Hjelm's class is part of the Sustainable City Year Program, a program at the University of Oregon that partners with one city, county or organization for an entire academic year. The Sustainable City Year Program began working with Medford in fall of 2013 and will devote 40,000 hours of student effort to a variety of city projects by June 2014.

Four students are drafting a cost recovery plan for the parks department, a way to price classes that will cover their direct costs and some of their indirect administrative costs. It will also look at ways Medford can finance the new baseball/softball fields.

The new fields would expand the number of teams able to participate in a local tournament by as many as 24, with each field adding the ability to handle an additional six to eight teams. Medford could then bid to host larger tournaments, bringing in more people to visit the community. The fields also will be able to be converted for soccer use.

"MPRD runs with very little general fund subsidies, which is very atypical," Hjelm said. "So, they want to continue to be able to do that."

Eight other students in the class are working on marketing and communication plans. Two groups will develop strategies on how to get more Medford residents involved with Parks and Recreation.

On Jan. 17, the group of business students traveled to Medford to talk with staff from the planning department and recreation services and tour the facilities.

"Just going there, realizing their vision and getting a hands-on look on what they're doing was the most helpful," said Austin Luvaas, the student liaison for the group creating the cost recovery plan. "We realized the vision they have for Medford, which is really to make it a city that can compete on a national level for tournaments."

Students are developing a survey that will be sent to customers and other Medford community members who are not already customers. They hope to learn what new classes people would be interested in, how they sign up for programs and how to get non-customers involved.

"After we get the surveys out, we'll go down and talk with some people, especially the people who aren't using the parks and rec programs now," said KJ Elden, the student liaison for one of the marketing groups.

The information gathered by the pricing and cost recovery team will be used to develop an interactive spreadsheet. The parks department can use it to plug in pricing options that will show how a given class or a fee fits into the budget and how much wiggle room there is to change the pricing.

Two marketing and communication teams also are developing plans. The first will focus on how they can make the website more usable by making it easier to register for classes and find information.

The second team will focus on bringing in underserved community members, in particular trying to raise involvement in the parks programs among seniors and the Latino population. U of O Prof. Geraldo Sandoval worked with the city of Medford in the fall, speaking with members of the local Latino population and helping city staff both better communicate with and advocate for minority groups.

At the end of the term, all three teams will turn in a written report and give a final presentation to the Parks and Recreation Department.

"It's really interesting looking at the new baseball fields they want to install there and think about how that's all going to work out from our side," Luvaas said. "It's a really cool thing to think that we'll have a big impact on how they decide to do things in the future."

Nicole Ginley-Hidinger is a senior at the University of Oregon majoring in journalism. She hopes to pursue a career in sports journalism.