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Springfield is UO project

The assignment: Solve some of the city's biggest challenges

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SPRINGFIELD — The city has just become a massive class assignment for hundreds of University of Oregon students.

Starting this fall, Springfield will be the focus of the UO's Sustainable City Year, part of a sustainability initiative that marries student projects with city needs.

A cross-disciplinary program, the initiative promotes environmentally sustainable design and development, UO program manager Chris Jones said.

Cities interested in having students tackle real-world challenges — creating green buildings, developing parks, improving traffic planning, refurbishing neighborhoods — can apply.

The two-year-old program has already garnered attention with international and national awards for work done in Gresham and Salem.

The theory is simple, Jones said. Students already must come up with projects to demonstrate their mastery in their areas of study. Under the Sustainable City Year, they work on real-life challenges and needs in Oregon communities.

“They are working on real projects for a real city,” Jones said, as opposed to hypothetical ideas developed in an academic setting by professors or students.

Among the nine projects students tackled in Gresham: coming up with sustainable development standards for large-scale commercial and retail projects, identifying potential conflicts between the city's mixed use development plans and its “nature in neighborhoods” policies, and designing a new city hall.

“We got a tremendous amount of what we viewed as consultant-level work from these grad students,” Gresham spokeswoman Laura Shepard said.

Because Gresham was the UO's guinea pig, the program was free to them. In the second year, five cities applied to participate, and the university selected Salem, which paid \$330,000 and in return received an estimated 80,000 hours of work from more than 500 students working on 16 projects that were part of 28 different academic courses in 10 different departments, Jones said.

Architecture students, for example, came up with a design for a new police station to replace Salem's aging, seismically deficient location in the basement of City Hall, Jones said.

As the Salem City Council considers a facility bond measure, it knows much more because of the student work, Jones said. It has a seismic feasibility study, a soil analysis, and two dozen ideas about where the new station could be located, how big it should be and what it might look like, he said.

The bulk of the money went into producing the reports and designs developed by the students, who were paid \$3.50 to \$5.50 an hour, according to a story on the project in the Statesman Journal newspaper. Similar work by consultants would cost much more, Jones said.

Besides architecture, the academic disciplines include public policy and planning, communications, business and law, Jones said.

While the work is focused on helping cities be environmentally sustainable, the university's definition is broad, Jones said.

Some of the work in Salem involved ways of reinventing the city's neighborhood associations to foster more community involvement.

The work that students will tackle in Springfield is still being refined but could include a redevelopment proposal for the former 40,000-square-foot Waremart grocery store, long empty and sitting on a site of nearly 11 acres off Mohawk Boulevard, Assistant City Manager Jeff Towery said.

The city could also use some fresh ideas for redeveloping the old Booth Kelly lumber mill, a 17-acre site that includes 200,000 square feet of large industrial buildings that the city owns and rents to businesses.

A "way finding" project is also on the list, which would help people figure out city travel routes. Few people may know that the most efficient route from the new Cabela's store at Gateway Mall to the downtown area is via Martin Luther King Parkway, Towery said.

The city gets to set the scope of the projects, including what they expect the students to deliver in the form of either designs or reports, which lessens the likelihood that Springfield will end up with a stack of dusty documents sitting on a shelf.

“We’ve invested in this, and we get to decide what the projects are and what they deliver to us,” Towery said.

The city will pay the UO \$230,000 to participate. While a half-dozen cities initially expressed interest in the 2011 program, which begins next fall, Springfield was one of just two to complete the application, a sign of tough financial times for local governments, Jones said.

“We heard a lot of ‘We’d love to do this if we were able to afford it,’” Jones said.

The Salem police station project got a nod from the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards, which sets licensing and credential standards. It awarded the project its 2011 Creative Integration of Practice and Education in the Academy.

The UO’s Sustainable Cities Initiative was one of five international finalists for the Globe Award for sustainability research, given out by the Globe Forum, which works on bringing sustainable innovations to the marketplace.

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