

Village people: Planning students uncover some surprises

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Set 40 college seniors loose on a city and they're bound to come back with some provocative findings after six months of investigation.

That's what Keith Pezzoli, head of the University of California San Diego urban studies and planning program, did last September.

He asked his students to think up a topic to explore, required them to spend 100 hours of time as interns in public or private institutions and asked them to present a research paper and display at the Price Center on campus last month.

Philip S. Li looked at the still-evolving City of Villages plan for redeveloping old neighborhoods being crafted by the San Diego Planning Department. Li's key finding: The planners put more effort into concepts than financing and therefore may find that their ideas have little chance of being implemented. The problem, he said, is that no one has come up with a politically acceptable way to finance \$2.5 billion in desired neighborhood improvements, let alone other expenses necessary for redeveloping existing communities. "Had city officials considered the financial constraints more seriously and concurrently to concept development," wrote Li, "City of Villages would look different than it does in its present state." He added: "This disclosure introduces an often-neglected weakness in smart growth. Planners rarely consider the totality of costs until later, compromising the successful completion of many projects."

In a related research effort, Joshua Hoffman focused on the impact bad zoning decisions have on future land-use policies. He found that former Mayor Pete Wilson's 1970s growth-management approach led to vast inner-city development, even as suburban development continued apace.

But the policy, which did not charge development impact fees in old neighborhoods, left behind "ghosts in the machine." The resulting overcrowding of schools, roads and parks left such a bad taste in the mouths of affected residents, Hoffman said, that current reforms may have a tough time being adopted. Recently, Hoffman said, new rules have been adopted to make up for infrastructure deficits left over from the Wilson era. But sometimes the requirements are so hefty that a project becomes infeasible. As an example, he said, the city would require the developer of a 65-unit apartment building on 52nd Street to set aside "49,000 square feet of open, recreational space, or roughly nine times the total area of the lot!" "The city found a way to pay millions of dollars to buy the Padres a new home," Hoffman wrote. "So why can't they find the funds to fix their own back yard?"

Stacy Berger looked at the process of planning and discovered the complicated politics in communities and among competing special-interest groups. When the county began revising its general plan, parallel to the city's effort, Berger said public input initially was funneled through representatives of the county's community planning groups. But when the results did not please developers, environmentalists and professional associations, a separate committee of those disgruntled interests was formed. "The (new) committee has built a great deal of respect with the board of supervisors as being a group that can work together and compromise despite different, sometimes opposing opinions," Berger said. "In the end, because there will be a united plan that these vastly different groups can stand up and support, the board will have to listen to them."

However, Berger also detected racial and gender deficiencies in the new committee that make it less than representative of the county population as a whole. At one of the meetings she attended, she counted 11 men and five women. "Male group members spoke approximately 74 times, while their female counterparts spoke 25 times," she said. More disturbingly, she said, all of the 15 members present were white.

Other interests, such as advocates for affordable housing, also were absent, she found, and quoted one county official as saying such an advocate might be seen as "radical" and "tangle up" the drive for a consensus. A real estate agent was identified as the main person who speaks up for affordability. "While this may or may not be true," Berger said, "the fact that there are no representatives who are minorities or representatives that are advocating for the low, socio-economic class is of concern. How much of an

impact this plays on the overall outcome of the process remains to be seen."

By law, the seniors' papers cannot be made public without going through university disclosure and consent hoops. But Pezzoli said he hopes their work will add to a long-term database called the Regional Workbench that other researchers can tap as they explore similar projects in the future. Urban studies students typically go on to careers in law, government, business and health, he said. And after 12 years, the program is beginning to bear fruit. One of the early alumni, Gail Goldberg, is director of the city's Planning Department. Meanwhile, Li has landed a part-time job in Goldberg's department, where he was an intern, to continue his interest in the City of Villages plan. Abstracts of the students' papers and other aspects of UCSD's urban studies program can be accessed at www.regionalworkbench.org/sequence.
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