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Fresh perspectives

UCSD undergrads bring new ideas to the planning table

April 13, 2008

Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength because of thine enemies, that thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger.

– Psalm 8: 1-2

The 70-some students in the urban studies and planning program at the University of California San Diego certainly aren't babes and sucklings, but they speak the truth when it comes to some of San Diego's most intractable urban issues.

Like transportation. Housing. Environmental protection. Land-use choices.

At the program's Expo XVIII last month, the seniors shared their findings with the public via theses running to 30-page papers, colorful computer-generated posters and videos conducted with mentors who volunteered their expertise.

UCSD political scientist Steve Erie, who oversees the program, pronounced this the best crop yet of meaningful research at the undergraduate level.

“They see things through fresh eyes and some very interesting questions,” Erie said. “Most of us are sort of in the ruts.”

Keith Pezzoli, who supervises the students' field research, organized the students into teams to tackle 10 “grand challenges,” ranging from architecture and urban design to public health and safety. Then the students mixed internships with classroom discussions, library research and real-life look-sees outside the ivory tower.

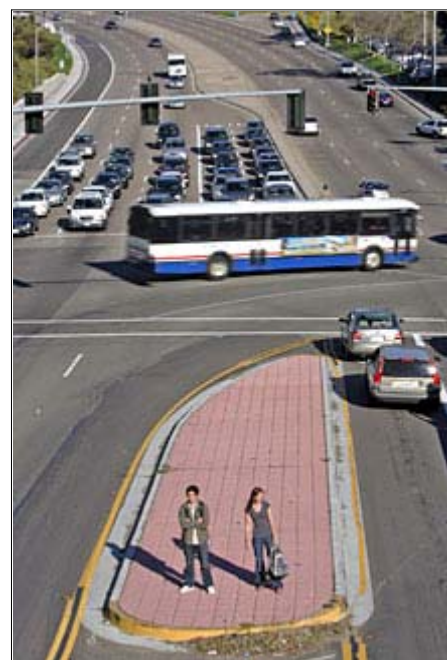
“It's all about building infrastructure in planning to enable students to enable civically-engaged research and service learning as part of an excellent undergraduate research activity,” Pezzoli said.

To get a sense of where the Millennial Generation wants to take the rest of us, one only has to select a random group of the papers and uncover kernels of new thinking. Happily, the recommendations were founded on some welcomed signs of reality and practicality – something not often generated in academia.

Take the findings of Becky Trayler, who wanted to find out if San Diego's growing traffic congestion could be alleviated without spending billions more on freeways and trolley lines.

Her answer: better intersection signalization.

“Currently, there is such an emphasis on mass transit that the city appears to be ignoring traffic signals, which is



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 Pictured at a busy intersection on La Jolla Village Drive, UCSD students Jason Runyan, 21, and Becky Trayler, 22, examined transportation issues in their urban studies and planning major.

unproductive because it is a problem that can be relatively (and) easily resolved,” she wrote.

Hallelujah, most San Diego motorists would respond. How many times do you speed up when the light goes green only to screech to a halt when it turns red at the next signal? Why aren't these signals coordinated to allow a freer flow of traffic?

Trayler decided to prove her case for change by driving along the Grand and Garnet avenue couplet in Pacific Beach. She measured her speed between signals, and a graph of her results resembled the recent rise and fall and rise of the stock market.

“If traffic signals along major roadways could be coordinated in a manner that reduced this stop-and-go pattern to flow smoother,” she concluded, “drivers would undoubtedly save fuel. With current gas prices, even a small reduction in fuel consumption would lead to significant savings for drivers.”

It turns out that Trayler is onto something, but only partially. San Diego city traffic engineer Duncan Hughes, when apprised of Trayler's work, agreed that the present synchronization for the city's 1,500 intersections could be fine-tuned if only he had a bit more money to monitor the signals' timing.

“The buzzword has been 'adaptive control systems,'” said Hughes, a 17-year veteran in the city's traffic management department.

It turns out that there is money for fine tuning, but of the \$250 million in voter-approved state bond funds, \$150 million is promised to Los Angeles, leaving the rest of the state, including California's second city, San Diego, to battle over the remaining crumbs. Hughes also said Caltrans prefers the money go for long-term traffic management infrastructure improvements rather than short-term staffing boosts that could increase oversight.

But even if there were unlimited money available, Hughes said synchronizing traffic can only improve efficiency marginally. Signals along a one-way street can be adjusted by pencil and paper. A two-way route is slightly more difficult. But add left-turn lanes, cross-traffic thoroughfares and variable traffic patterns throughout the day – not counting the unpredictable traffic accident – and rocket scientists using supercomputers couldn't promise a stress-free commute.

“We certainly do try,” Hughes said.

Trayler's three transportation team members tackled other aspects of local coming and going.

Jason Runyan looked at the record of the San Diego Trolley over the past 25 years and asked, if it's been so successful, why aren't we building a lot more lines?

Ian Clark said the trolley is too expensive and money should instead be invested in bus rapid transit, spiffy buses running on dedicated lanes unobstructed by competing car and truck traffic.

And in a paper called “Transportation for All,” Andrew Chang despaired of all mass transit, bus or trolley, because it is too slow and infrequent to handle most travelers' needs. He tried getting from his home in Rancho Peñasquitos to his job in Rancho Santa Fe, 13.1 miles apart. It took 2 hours 10 minutes, including 42 minutes on his bike – “which does not suit business attire very well.”

Several students sang the praises of “seawater agriculture” as an antidote to global warming, while Rachel M. Hunnicutt blamed developers and consumers, not architects, for not embracing more eco-friendly products and “green” design. Her solution: Manufacturers should discount their prices to develop market demand and, presumably, make up the difference in volume.

Affordable housing and the mortgage meltdown attracted some new thoughts (and the acknowledgment that many

players are at fault), while Cory Keen, a surfer, argued for a more environmentally sensitive approach to development in Baja California.

Bill Anderson, San Diego's planning director, who addressed the students at the end of their expo, proclaimed a “sea change” at City Hall in terms of planning – infill and redevelopment are in, sprawl is out. And he encouraged the students to become professional planners so they can help shape the future.

“Planning issues never go away,” Anderson said, “and if we ignore them for long, they only get worse.” And policy-makers “will need us even more.”


■Smokestacks & Geraniums is a monthly look at growth and development issues as they relate to historic trends in San Diego. The name is derived from a 1917 San Diego mayoral campaign pitting quick-fix forces against advocates of long-term planning. For a look at the UCSD urban program, go to seniorsequence.net and the campus' Regional Workbench Consortium at regionalworkbench.org.

■Roger M. Showley: (619) 293-1286; roger.showley@uniontrib.com

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