Students from Fernando Burga's Land Use Planning course presented their policy recommendations to the City of Ramsey via posters at an event on December 8, 2017. Photo: Bruce Silcox

Making Planning Legible

Urban and regional planning students are helping the City of Ramsey visualize new policy approaches.

December 15, 2017—What good is data-driven policy research if it lives in a three-ring binder on a shelf? If it's so text-heavy that the people who need to hear about it just can't get around to reading it?

This is the problem Assistant Professor Fernando Burga is trying to solve in his Land Use Planning class.

Partnering with the Resilient Communities Project (http://rcp.umn.edu/2017/03/18/rcp-selects-the-city-of-ramsey-as-its-next-community-partner/), Burga's students are learning how to develop land use solutions in suburban areas and developing data visualization (and some deep Adobe Creative Suite) techniques to show real policy solutions.

Resilient Communities Project (RCP) is a program of the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (http://www.cura.umn.edu/) (CURA) at the University of Minnesota, and is a cofounding member of the national Educational Partnerships for Innovation in Communities (http://www.epicn.org/) (EPIC) Network. Each year a Minnesota community is awarded the one-year partnership, and then works with CURA and its partner faculty and courses to investigate ways to become more sustainable and resilient.

This year's community is Ramsey, a city in Anoka County at the edge of the expanding Twin Cities metropolitan area. With more than 50 percent of its boundary made of rivers, only 29 percent of its land developed, and a North Star rail station in town, Ramsey faces opportunities for growth and challenges to environmental sustainability. Working with CURA, Ramsey city staff and officials developed 20 different projects they wanted to explore during their year with RCP. Their concerns address issues from affordable housing to shoreline restoration, creating a community center to development fees, and business and retail cultivation to healthy pollinator habitats. Ramsey struggles with the common exurban and rural challenge of "changing while staying the same." The idea is to identify approaches that make the city more resilient.

Enter Burga's planning class. The 43 students took on 14 of Ramsey's projects, and in teams of three they set about to investigate. Their work included visiting Ramsey, researching policies in comparable cities, gathering data, exploring every possible solution, and making policy recommendations.

But that was just the beginning.

Communicating a Thousand Words

"I don't do reports. I do posters. Posters generate conversation." So says Burga, who brings his expertise in public participation, land-use planning, and design to his teaching at the Humphrey School. His approach is unusual for public policy schools but common to planning, which is often housed with architecture and design at other universities.

So this semester Burga's students juggled the dual challenges of researching and developing real-world policy solutions while also learning software programs that are usually the domain of professional designers, architects, and artists. They created maps, elevations, cross sections, before-and-after scenarios, and diagrams. They developed color palettes and font systems. And throughout the semester they applied a design thinking approach, "failing forward," refining and reiterating until their poster series were completed for a public presentation in the Humphrey School atrium on December 8.

First-year MURP student Tram Hoang not only developed affordable housing policy options, she also worked with Illustrator and InDesign for the first time, and appreciated the experience. "It's a skill that is lacking in emerging planners. Because a lot of the time we forget that design can be very important in communicating information, and an image can communicate a thousand words."

PeggySue Imihy, another first-year MURP, tackled development fees with her project, and echoed Hoang's thoughts. "It's something that as planners we'll have to do in our careers, make text-heavy info that can be really boring in report form look visually engaging. It makes you think critically about how to take this topic and make it relatable."

"How do you make planning legible? And fun?" Burga asks. With each team creating nine or so posters to tell their policy narrative, Burga imagined a museum-like experience where the viewer has time to reflect

and connect with information that is educational and deliberative. With 130 posters exhibited by the class, it was an intense, immersive experience. And officials from Ramsey took notice.

"The visual approach to communicating research, data collection, and recommendations was exactly what we were looking for," said Tim Gladhill, the community development director for the City of Ramsey. "We too often default to professional jargon that doesn't translate well to our residents and business owners. We believe [this approach] will set a new standard for how we develop policy and communication documents."

He continued, "We were blown away by the presentation. The projects far exceeded our original expectations and the students knocked it out of the park."

"I wanted us to create an overwhelming experience where the audience is surrounded by policy narratives that they can engage with," says Burga. "My goal is for [planning staff] to run away with the posters. They want to have them in their offices, thinking, 'This is what we've been asking for, and now it's here.' A graph, a pie chart, a rendering… woven together in a cohesive narrative."

For more information about the Resilient Communities Project, or to learn how to apply to become a future community partner, visit rcp.umn.edu or email RCP at rcp@umn.edu.