

‘Living Streets,’ sustainability are plan goals

Student energy powers Resilient Communities Project

By Tim Faklis

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*One of the emphases of the “sustainable” portion of the Resilient Communities Project is keeping North St. Paul residents aware of the gem they have in a local preserve.
(Linda Baumeister/Review)*

Staying true to its name, the Resilient Communities Project is finally in North St. Paul.

After a pair of hiccups, students and staff from the University of Minnesota–driven organization are now working together with the city on a project that involves the Living Street Plan, a residential rebuilding concept that combines road reconstruction with environmental sustainability. It has included proposals for new sidewalks, bike paths and water–quality protection.

“Students really are looking for opportunities to engage in real–world projects,” explained Michael Greco, program manager for the RCP. “In a lot of classes at the university, students don’t have a chance to do that. They learn the theory behind the issue that they’re looking at, but they might not get an opportunity to apply that knowledge to a real–world situation.”

North St. Paul passed the Living Street Plan in 2011, with a couple projects set up for the subsequent years. Some small, local resistance temporarily halted the plans, but that has since changed, and several class projects are underway.

Graduate and undergraduate students are able to acquire a grade as part of a series of classes associated with the project, but the students see it as more than simply a mark on their GPA.

“We, quite frankly, are thrilled to be working in North St. Paul,” said Colleen Sauber, whose work focuses on the city’s South Nature Preserve and a class on adult education programming. “Having this real-life project to work on is exciting, and very rewarding.”

Some of the projects have included: door-to-door visits by students to inform residents about the benefits of the Living Streets concept, as well as work on the Southwood Nature Preserve, something that Sauber said she has been working relentlessly on. “What it’s all about is what North St. Paul wants,” Sauber said. “(City leaders) are hoping for increased awareness and use of the preserve, and we’re going to try to help with that.”

“That project is focused on how to get residents to see the Nature Preserve as an amenity in the community and use it as an opportunity to educate residents about environmental issues,” Greco said of the efforts being done on the preserve.

Other students, like graduate student Wes Johnson, worked on market niches for the city, both tapped and untapped, in an effort to better understand trends of business around the area.

“The process went very smoothly. North Saint Paul staff and residents were very welcoming and receptive to students doing this kind of work in the community,” Johnson said. “The challenge with these types of projects is getting started in the right direction soon enough to get meaningful work done, because we typically only have one semester or less for these projects.”

Many of these students have aspirations to do similar work beyond college, with their projects in North St. Paul serving as a steppingstone in the process.

“It’s exactly what I want to be doing when I get done with school,” explained Cadence Peterson, who is working on her master’s degree in urban planning.

“It varies from project to project. Some of the smaller ones are more like a class assignment, but some of the bigger ones are a lot more involved.”

Resilient Communities Project works on one community project per year, with the first one in 2013, when the U students successfully completed a project in Minnetonka. The group now has an annual competitive request system, with cities across the area trying to acquire their services. After their year with North St. Paul, the students will turn their attention to Roseville.

The college program is an initiative of the Sustainability Faculty Network at the U of M, with funding also coming from Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, along with the Institute on the Environment.

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Southwood Nature Preserve is one of the focuses of the Resilient Communities project in North St. Paul. (Linda Baumeister/Review)



Southwood Nature Preserve is a haven to birds including migrating robins, mallard ducks and nesting wood ducks. (Linda Baumeister/Review)