

Humphrey School of Public Affairs

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Matched Pairs Method

The Resilient Communities Project is putting students to work creating solutions for area cities and counties.



Students in Fernando Burga's fall 2017 Land Use Planning course conceived of this riverside retail development for Ramsey, Minn. Illustration: Matthew J. Lupini

Story by **Carmen Peota**

Like many small cities on the edge of a large urban area, Ramsey, Minnesota, was grappling

with the kinds of questions that come with middle age: How could it better meet the housing needs of its citizens, develop its downtown, and attract new and retain old businesses?

Last year, Ramsey brought those questions and more to the University of Minnesota's Resilient Communities Project (RCP), co-founded in 2012 by Carissa Slotterback, now Humphrey School associate dean, and Mike Greco (MURP '10), now RCP director. The program connects communities in Minnesota with University of Minnesota faculty and students, who help with projects that meet city-identified needs.

Among students matched with Ramsey last fall were those in adjunct instructor Bob Streetar's Community Economic Development class. In one project that particularly impressed Greco, the students researched business incubator models used in other Minnesota cities, producing a 33-page report.

"It's all helpful information that Ramsey's economic development director can now use," Greco says, noting city staff likely would not have had the time to do that type of background research.



Greco (pictured at left) says past student work has led to real changes in communities. For example, work done five years ago has resulted in new housing options in Minnetonka. Students from a housing studies class proposed an ordinance change to allow for smaller units that would better accommodate aging residents. The city's housing stock had consisted of mostly large single-family houses on large lots.

With an updated zoning ordinance, the city has since seen construction of two new senior co-op housing developments. A third small-unit housing development is in the works. "That would not have been possible if it were not for the adoption of a new zoning category that the students recommended," Greco notes.

Interested communities apply to the RCP in February of each year, and a review committee

assesses their readiness for the partnership and whether their projects seem appropriate for student work. The review committee also looks for broad buy-in from the organization. The committee then selects the community. “We don’t want this partnership to be something that just one city staff person is excited about,” Greco says.

Greco notes that although students are not professional consultants, there’s much they can do. This spring, students in an economics course helped Ramsey officials write a business plan for an incubator, building on the research done by students in Streetar’s Community Economic Development course.