Western Washington University students are helping Edmonds this year on several projects including researching methods of minimizing stormwater impact in the Edmonds marsh. (Genna Martin / Herald file)

Western students helping Edmonds on sustainable projects

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In September, Edmonds became a guinea pig.

By choice.

Edmonds was selected to be the subject of a year-long program where Western Washington University students help shape the city's environmental policies.

Over the course of the 2016-17 academic year, scores of students from Western Washington will work with the city through the Sustainable Cities Partnership.

Edmonds is in good hands. Going green has become a hallmark of Western’s campus culture. Its environmental science college, Huxley College, is one of the oldest in the nation.
The program was modeled after the University of Oregon’s pilot Sustainable Cities Initiative program.

Similar programs have sprung up around the country.

“A university is the birthplace of the new innovations, the cauldron of inventions,” said David Davidson, program coordinator of Western’s Sustainable Cities Partnership program.

Davidson expects at least 250 students to enroll in Sustainable Cities Partnership-related courses this academic year, with majors from business, computer science, marketing and environmental science, contributing diverse skills to a wide range of sustainability issues.

This quarter, journalism students are promoting a downtown arts-and-culture corridor; environmental science students are researching methods of minimizing stormwater impact in the Edmonds marsh; and computer science seniors are coding a mobile mapping application.

Davidson is confident that the relationship will continue after the academic year.

“The model is, ‘Onto the next city,’ but every year they’re looking for outside partners for 30 or 40 students that need to do senior projects,” he said. “I can imagine them going back to Edmonds year after year.”

Mayor Dave Earling and several other Edmonds officials visited the campus in Bellingham for a luncheon in September.

“To see all of the excitement and energy of students involved was really terrific,” Earling said.

Earling, a former instructor at Shoreline Community College, has complete confidence in undergraduates at the wheel.

“I know that students have lots of good ideas,” he said. “I’m sure that they will have, on many of these projects, a positive impact. It will truly be fun.”

Western students have long concentrated on projects to improve sustainability on campus.

External efforts have mostly been limited to nearby cities.

“For years, what they’ve been working on is Bellingham’s problems,” Davidson said. “All throughout a university campus are service learning courses. We’ve worked with Whatcom County and the city’s parks department.”

Those projects include stream buffers and wetlands and the Nooksack Salmon Enhancement Program.

The Sustainable Cities Partnership was an opportunity to expand Western’s horizons.

Robert Chave, Edmonds Developmental Services director, was instrumental in landing the partnership by constructing the city’s application.

He approached the mayor with the idea. Earling was eager, with one condition:
“As I told the staff, ‘I’m glad to enter as long as we win,’” Earling said. “And I’ll be darned, we did win.”

No wonder: Edmonds’ robust application included 46 project proposals across various categories. They went back and forth with Western about program possibilities, eventually whittling the number to 11 projects.

Edmonds’ sustainability track record helped its chances.

“We have the green team within the city that tries to improve efficiencies and do simple stuff like recycling,” Chave said. “We have all kinds of things like electric cars, and our City Hall is Energy Star awarded, which is unusual, especially for a retrofitted building like that. It’s an overarching approach to how Edmonds does things.”

In 2005, then Edmonds Mayor Gary Haakenson signed the Mayor’s Climate Protection Agreement. In 2012, the Association of Washington Cities awarded Edmonds with the Municipal Excellence Award for its sustainability initiatives. Chave wrote the city’s first sustainability effort in 2009.

“These are all things that the city has an interest in, but the resources weren’t necessarily there right now,” Chave said. “So it pushes these initiatives forward, and helps get them a leg up. Otherwise they’re having to wait for staff availability, or money, or those kinds of things.”

The cost-benefit analysis of using student research and work allows the city to start projects previously out of reach.

“The city had contacted a few companies to get a kind of estimate of what that (mobile application) would cost, and they come up with a range of $100,000,” Chave said. “With the students, we could do it with just $7,000. That’s crazy savings.”

The benefits are more than financial.

“It may open some eyes,” Chave said. “Classwork is classwork, but it’s sometimes a little more complicated when you get to the real world.”