Reimagining Ferndale: WWU's Urban Transitions Studio to present project findings to city officials March 19

by John Thompson, Office of Communications and Marketing

WWU's senior Urban Transitions Studio (UTS) and Urban Planning and Sustainable Development program, in conjunction with the university’s Sustainable Communities Partnership, will present the findings of its research project focused on student-researched proposals to reimagine Ferndale’s downtown core at a Town Hall meeting at 6 p.m. on Tuesday, March 19 at the Ferndale Chamber of Commerce.

Western Today chatted with WWU Professor of Environmental Studies and Director of the Urban Planning and Sustainable Development program, Nick Zaferatos, and three of his UTS students – Adam Crutcher (Bothell), Alison Tompkins (Sultan) and Zoe Watson (Puyallup) – about the Ferndale project, the work involved, what they hope the research can do for the city, and how this kind of work will benefit them after they graduate and begin work as city planners.

WT: Nick, this project is being done in conjunction with Western’s Sustainable Communities Partnership and the City of Ferndale. How is it similar, and different, from other projects your senior planning classes and the Urban Transitions Studio has worked on in the past?

Nick: Our senior planning studio classes are always conducted in partnership with a local community. The Urban Planning and Sustainable Development major is a professional program that trains students to become professional planners. As part of
that training, students participate in applied studio classes that engage with communities and real life situations and learn about the process of community plan development.

Since WWU initiated its university-wide Sustainable Communities Partnership program, the Urban Transition Studio program has participated in those partnership programs to bring planning expertise to communities in the broader region. The Ferndale City Center planning study is our current studio focus and engages 3 planning studios in fall, winter, and spring quarters. The fall class emphasizes data development and analysis of the study site. The winter studio emphasizes community engagement and plan concept development. The spring studio examines implementation strategies for the planning concepts, including development regulations, incentive programs, and capital budgeting.

**WT: What were the City of Ferndale's main goals of the project?**

**Nick:** The City of Ferndale expressed a need to reevaluate its approach to meeting projected population growth by exploring planning alternatives that would focus much of that future growth within its existing downtown. The approach aligns with Washington State’s Growth Management Act policies that seek to restrain urban sprawl by emphasizing infill development within existing urban areas that are serviced by existing public infrastructure. Downtown rejuvenation has become a hallmark of sustainable urban development over the past several decades as many communities are injecting new life into their downtowns.

**Zoe:** For years, Ferndale residents have been calling downtown Bellingham their downtown. They want to create an image and character for Ferndale through the revitalization of their own downtown.

**WT: Bringing a fresh set of eyes to city planning issues can be both eye opening and a little jarring for the planners who have grappled with these issues for years. What new ideas do you think your research was able to bring to the table for Ferndale?**

**Adam:** I think the aspect of planning that we bring to the table is the ability to listen to residents and try to implement what they want in their city. Oftentimes it seems community members are not given a platform to voice their opinions on how they
want their city to operate, so I believe that aspect was accomplished with our involvement.

Allison: I hope that our project offers the City a different and more imaginative outcome for downtown development.

Zoe: Part of our perspective was simply new. We weren't beholden to some of the politics and drama of the small town so we had the opportunity to think outside the box a little. We saw several sites as areas that were ripe for development that they might not have considered. For example, many of us found that Ferndale citizens loved their parks and wanted them all connected with multimodal trails. Our plans represented that.

WT: What kind of metrics and data did you need to gather to produce an accurate proposal?

Allison: The majority of our projections and analysis was done using GIS (Geographic Information Sciences). Our class was fortunate enough to have several talented GIS students to help gather, process and project data for our final proposals and deliverables. Our original data came from the Whatcom County Assessors property data and the City of Ferndale's existing GIS data. We also used available demographic data for the area - a lot of this data came from existing City Plans (particularly their comprehensive plan).

More importantly than the collection of quantitative data, we also collected quite a bit of qualitative data. We did a number of "ground truthing" activities in order to get a sense of feel and place for the community. In the beginning of winter quarter we also held a community meeting and collected community input on the project. This data was the most helpful for formulating our plan and recommendations for the Downtown.

Nick: Students were organized into separate teams to produce 3 land use plan and mobility alternatives, in addition to about a dozen topical studies that included a parks and trails plan, social equity considerations addressing issues such as affordable housing, homelessness and gentrification, hazards mitigation, urban design guidelines and recommended infrastructure improvements.
The urban design metrics that were employed in this study included the LEED (Leadership for Energy and Environmental Design) Neighborhood Development standards to guide plan development and measure the degree of sustainability reflected in each plan alternative. The final plan alternatives were assessed using the LEED ND metrics checklist.

**Zoe:** We spent the entirety of last quarter collecting and inputting parcel data and this quarter we started off with a community workshop that gave us ideas of what the community was looking for in the new downtown. Ideas on architectural style and overall design and look.

**WT:** As students, being able to contribute research and planning concepts that may reshape an entire city's downtown core must be very rewarding, but also comes with the pressure of needing to produce at a high level. What was that process like, and how did that pressure impact how you did your jobs?

**Adam:** I don't think we've felt much pressure with the project. We more so want to be sure that we are creating a plan that is creative and can fulfill the need of the community, as previous planning decisions have led to the downtown of Ferndale being so inactive. The process has so far been smooth as we have been able to hear what community members feel their town lacks and the feedback from city officials on our drafts have been fairly positive to this point.

**Allison:** This was definitely a struggle for many students in the studio. We had to find ways to be creative, inventive and imaginative while also remaining practical, ethical and rational. We have had several opportunities to share some of our preliminary work with City planners and community members. These opportunities assured us that we were acting in likeness with staff and community members. Our professor (Dr. Zaferatos) also shared some wisdom with us one afternoon when we were feeling particularly overwhelmed and stressed. He told us that being overwhelmed is a sign that we are doing a good job.

Making educated and resourceful decisions for a community is not something that should come easily to a person. Part of the planning process is that everything we propose or recommend will go through several levels of scrutiny by the community of Ferndale and will result in something that the City and its residence will hopefully be
proud of. Planning is as much, if not more, about the public process than it is about any professional's research or input.

**Zoe**: After mostly conceptual classes in this major, it's very nice to get a bit more real world action. Since we had such a short time frame to complete such a large project that meant several late nights and I wish we could have had a bit more time, but I'm proud of what we accomplished.

**WT**: How do you think work like this helps prepare you for your career after you leave WWU?

**Adam**: I think the process shows where we still have much to learn. Areas such as community interaction are topics that this project has shown that we need to improve upon but I still think we have done well in addressing most of the issues the community has brought up. Working in groups and taking on different leadership roles has also been important as it helps me learn how to communicate better with my cohort.

**Allison**: The studio series is where we as planning students get to apply all our personal and academic knowledge into real world practice. What I enjoy most about being a project leader is being able to see each individual's strengths. Whether it be GIS, critical writing, architectural design, project management, public speaking, or data analysis everyone has something to contribute to the work we are doing with the city. Not all of us will go into municipal planning after graduation, but the skills we have learned to apply through this program will be beneficial in any future career field.

**Zoe**: After the community meeting, the meeting with developers and the feedback that we received from the city, I was able to get a better understanding of the politics that can go into city planning. Everyone has different interests and different ideas for their downtown. While sometimes it is hard to compromise, it's satisfying to come up with a plan that at least some of them will like.
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