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**December 19, 2006**

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## **Local Students Work to Spur Economic Development** *Program encourages university, student investment in region*

FERNDALE – Cities across the southeast Michigan region are receiving redevelopment ideas from university students as part of a program developed by the Michigan Suburbs Alliance.

The program, UniverCities Connection, pairs local governments with students and professors from Michigan's top universities through classroom projects. Michigan State University urban planning students wrapped up the final projects of the semester in Eastpointe on Friday.

“Most cities’ budget constraints hinder their opportunities to hire consultants and design the necessary strategic plans to revitalize the city, so the UniverCities project provides a way for students to gain real experience and build upon classroom theory without burdening local governments,” said Conan Smith, Executive Director of the Michigan Suburb Alliance. “With a united effort among students, professors, and Michigan suburbs, redevelopment projects will benefit all communities by improving educational experiences and providing solutions to challenges faced by these older cities.”

Two classroom projects occurred this fall: one directed by Dr. Gary Sands of Wayne State University, and the other by Dr. Igor Vojnovic of Michigan State University. Sands’ graduate urban planning class addressed economic development challenges in Allen Park, Berkley, Grosse Pointe Woods, Pontiac, Hamtramck, Rochester Hills, Royal Oak and Ypsilanti. Vojnovic’s class generated redevelopment ideas for a vacant site at 8 Mile Road and Gratiot in Eastpointe, a former Kmart. Upon completion, students presented their ideas to city staff.

The UniverCities Connection program was created to build mutually beneficial relationships between cities and universities in southeast Michigan. These relationships help inform professors’ research priorities, give students opportunities to apply classroom theories to actual challenges and real projects, and provide cities with fresh ideas and free-of-charge insight.

More importantly, the program helps local leaders develop innovative approaches to economic development and encourages future professionals to continue making a difference in southeast Michigan after graduation.

During the course of the classroom projects, students tackle economic redevelopment goals such as attracting new residents, diversifying local business ventures, and increasing property values. They also

examine current practices, anticipated challenges, goals for future development, and objections among stakeholders in the area.

“It is important to place the urban geography, planning, and urban design theories, techniques, and principles learned in class into an applied setting where the students face the real life issues that urban practitioners confront daily,” said Vojnovic. “At the same time, to have students complete a series of varying development proposals for a specific site allows city officials, developers, and residents an ability to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of specific development directions from a politically unbiased perspective and at no cost. It ends up being a win-win situation for all involved.”

The culmination of the projects includes a complete presentation to officials using CAD 3D technology. Beyond thoroughly researching the city and developing a strategy, students must sell their ideas to city representatives and prove that their suggestions will reflect the desired solution to the city’s specific challenges. Last week’s presentations offered city leaders many new ideas:

- Eastpointe received a range of redevelopment suggestions for its former Kmart after students worked in groups to vision the site. Among them were implementing dense residential and walkable commercial and retail development, adding unique and upscale architecture to create a welcoming gateway to the city, and utilizing local art and public spaces to create a sense of community.
- Students recommended creating a CD-format marketing brochure to advertise the city of Allen Park to potential investors.
- Ideas for improving Hamtramck’s Central Business District included encouraging renovation above first floor retail outlets and other mixed-use development, utilizing Neighborhood Enterprise Zone and Historic District economic development tools, and expanding direct marketing efforts to the business community.

“Bringing ideas from the classroom together with all of the wonderful development going on in the city of Hamtramck, especially at a time when resources are scarce, is a tremendous benefit,” said Erik Tungate, Community and Economic Development Director for the City of Hamtramck.

The Michigan Suburbs Alliance created UniverCities Connection in 2005. In addition to organizing classroom projects, the program works in tandem with universities to produce research that addresses the most acute challenges facing mature communities in southeast Michigan.

The Michigan Suburbs Alliance is a coalition of mature, built-out cities working to elevate regional cooperation, reform public policies, and stimulate redevelopment. Its 25 member cities span Wayne, Oakland, Macomb and Washtenaw counties. Visit [www.suburbsalliance.org](http://www.suburbsalliance.org) for more information.

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