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Cal Poly students offer their visions of city's downtown

BY ELLEN HOLLAND DEC. 8, 2006



Armed with idealic ideas including a more pedestrian-friendly downtown, increased community interaction with Atascadero Creek and emphasis on the city's agricultural and architectural roots, Cal Poly architecture students lent their knowledge to those in attendance at a special study session of Atascadero Planning Commission on Tuesday. "We're told to aim high and shoot for the stars," student Kristin Gause said when asked if she considered the budget of her project that included Michelangelo's 12 point star in the Sunken Gardens, a tent city park and architecture resembling the City Administration Building surrounding Atascadero's historic center.



Fourteen students enrolled in their third year in the university's landscape architecture department each presented a project that re-envisioned Atascadero's downtown. The projects, which followed two similar assignments that focused on real life situations at Cal Poly and Isla Vista, challenged students to come up with a variety of ideas, Professor Omar Faruque said. "The spirit of this quarter was to be engaged in these projects that have some real life issues," Faruque said and added the aim of the project was to get students to study Atascadero and examine what the city needs in terms of future planning.

The students visited with the city's planning department about five weeks ago when they reviewed the city's general and downtown revitalization plans and were introduced to the city's basic history.

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"The very origin of Atascadero is idea-driven," Faruque said. "Its history is dotted with the novelty of visionary ideas. The sustenance of those ideas and other great ideas in the contemporary context of economy and demography is the key to its future. That is why I challenged the students to come up with a variety of ideas and strategies for its downtown revitalization with due respect to its history and ecology."

After meeting with city staff, the students walked around Atascadero's downtown area and began to work on their projects. Community Development Director Warren Frace and Assistant Community Development Director Steve McHarris then visited the students at Cal Poly to provide comments and suggestions on their draft concept plans.

"We tried to give them comments on the character of Atascadero," McHarris said and added he and Frace highlighted unique ideas and tried to give the students a sense of reality when projects seemed too ambitious.

Many of the projects focused on the pedestrian tunnel that links Atascadero's downtown area to locations across Highway 101, including Atascadero High School.

"What I really wanted to do was to link the downtown area," student Chris Anderson said of his project that emphasized pedestrian movement and suggested the Wrestling Bacchantes sculpture be moved to serve as an entrance piece to a plaza located near the tunnel. "There's no real key thing that drives people into that space."

"I hope that a lot of their good ideas don't get lost," Atascadero resident Eric Greening said and added the pedestrian tunnel "is an important part of our city's pedestrian circulation."

Other students suggested ideas such as reducing El Camino Real to one lane each way, a bus terminal located on the south end of the city's main thoroughfare and even an outdoor plaza that could double as an ice skating rink in the winter months.

Accentuating Atascadero's agricultural beginnings, Claudia de la Fuente gave one of the night's most unique presentations with her idea surrounding urban agriculture and the inclusion of community gardens throughout the downtown area. The gardens, de la Fuente said, would be a series of elevated crops rotated according to the seasons.

"You could go and pick vegetables or just hang out," the student added.

A considerable number of the projects also emphasized the utilization of the Atascadero Creek as a place to create a sense of

community.

Amelia Capron, who presented her idea of a plaza along the creek known as Creekside Plaza, said, "I really wanted the community to be able to interact with the creek, but not to interfere with the environment."

Daniel Montalto, a student that had never been to Atascadero before the project began, focused his efforts on pedestrian circulation. One of the ideas Montalto presented was a pedestrian bridge "that would link the new Colony Square basically to the other side of the El Camino corridor," he said. "[The bridge] is going to be a community-driven project; it has to be."

Montalto, originally from New York and studying at the University of Rhode Island, is currently studying at Cal Poly through an exchange program and said it was nice to present to people outside the normal realm of his college programs.

"When they graduate they'll have to do the same thing," Faruque said of the presentations.

Kyle Nickel, who harkened back to the intentions of Atascadero's founder, E.G. Lewis, and the city's original planner, Ebenezer Howard, for his project, stressed open parks and green spaces. "I thought [Lewis' and Howard's] original plan was very responsible to the needs of the area," he said.

Nickel's project created mixed-use buildings around the Sunken Gardens with restaurants on bottom and current businesses on top. Each of these restaurants, he said, would be required to include either a green patio or garden.

The student's project also included the use of a bioswell, or natural filtration system for urban runoff. Nickel said he enjoyed "just being able to take a city and do it in the right way with bioswells and green spaces."

Bill Durgin, Cal Poly's provost, was one of many people associated with the university in attendance for the presentations.

"I found them to be really terrific reflections of all the hard work the students have done," he said. "I'm an enthusiastic supporter of project-based learning and this was a really good example."

McHarris, who said the presentations served as more of a learning process for the students, said everyone in attendance heard some new, fresh ideas that could be incorporated into the city's future planning process.

"I appreciate all the wonderful ideas," planning commission chair Ellen Beraud said.

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It's most likely that we will get an Edwards
Cinema, but an AMC or Cinemark cinema would
be nice. They max out to 70,000sq. ft.
David