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## Students Tackle City Issues

From the Lowell Sun

By Jennifer Myers

LOWELL -- The city has problems. University students have ideas and solutions.

It is a pairing as brilliant as spaghetti and meatballs, yet underutilized.

UMass Lowell psychology professor Bill Berkowitz is working to change that, bringing community and neighborhood leaders together with students in the university's graduate program in Community Social Psychology.

This past Tuesday night 25 students and neighborhood leaders sat in a circle in Room 205 of Coburn Hall to talk trash.

Ninety minutes later, Riverside Community Council President Elaine Pantano left with three pages of notes, her head spinning with ideas on how to curb illegal dumping on property owned by National Grid on Felton Street:

Put up signs that imply there is video surveillance in the area. Ask the city to put up a Dumpster, so couches, televisions and tires would be contained. Install motion lights to deter outlaws from stopping to dump.

Turn the vacant land turned dumpsite into a public garden, "Felton Gardens," suggests Berkowitz.

He points to a similar tactic used at Gillette Stadium in Foxboro. Flowers planted along the perimeter of the playing field deter fans from rushing the field.

"People will naturally hesitate before trampling on petunias," he says.

The seven-session seminar has met for 90 minutes every Tuesday night since March 24. Karon Bergeron from the Greater Lowell Chamber of Commerce spoke about downtown business and student

involvement; Victoria Fahlberg of ONE Lowell discussed minority representation in the city's voting system; Lynnda Ignacio and Paul Belley from the Pawtucketville Citizens Council spoke on how to prevent the threat of local flooding in conjunction with Christine Tabak from the Merrimack River Watershed Council's talk on how to develop public awareness about water quality.

Students are presented with a community problem in advance. They write a paper and offer solutions. Those papers are presented to the speakers before discussion.

"We've always been closely connected with the community, for what we hope is mutual benefit," said Berkowitz.

He added that he is particularly interested in neighborhood life, especially teaching his students practical

applications of principles because, "you can more easily see the results of what you're doing; and you can do excellent work in the neighborhood with little or no money or technical skill, sometimes with only a modest time investment. "

"The feedback has been absolutely fantastic," says Pantano. "A lot of great ideas came out that we really can use."

This brief series has had some unintended positive consequences. First, many of the city's neighborhood organizations are very strong and efficient, but their leaders seldom converge.

"The best thing is to hear what is going on in the other neighborhoods," said Kathleen Marcin, president of the Downtown Neighborhood Association. "We all have the same problems and by talking about them together we can come to better solutions. More interaction between the neighborhood groups leads to a stronger city."

Marcin added that the students' fresh ideas are helpful because "when you are living the problems sometimes you lose your focus and perspective on an issue."

The students, especially those from outside Lowell, have learned a lot about the city and have been able to use the sessions to network. But, they say there is still a lot of untapped potential.

"First-year graduate student Lindsey Tarrant said, for example, engineering students could help with flooding issues in Pawtucketville.

Fellow graduate student Michelle Crouch agrees, saying that the university should connect neighborhood groups with classes or student groups that can help.

Crouch added that there is talk about continuing the discussions next semester, even though the class will be over.

Tarrant and Crouch agree on something else: They want to stay in Lowell after graduation.

University spokeswoman Patti McCafferty said 85 percent of students remain in the state for at least five years after graduation, due in large part to internships, practicum courses, service learning and volunteering opportunities offered by the school.

City Manager Bernie Lynch, a 1978 graduate of the university, said Crouch and Tarrant are the type of budding young professionals that the city is targeting in its "Alive. Unique. Inspiring" marketing campaign.

"They are the people who are attracted to our housing stock, cultural amenities and the unique qualities we have in the city," he said.

On Tuesday, Taya Dixon Mullane of the Lower Highlands Neighborhood Group will discuss "Building Neighborhood Participation and Trust." On May 5, Diane Waddell from the Living Waters Ministry of Hope will present "Helping the Homeless Outside the Shelters." Discussions are free and open to the public, from 7 to 8:30 p.m. in Room 205 of Coburn Hall on Broadway.

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