South Wellington Community Process: An Experiment in Service Learning

by Don Alexander, MCIP

Service learning, whereby students are involved in research or community assistance projects as an integral part of their studies, is increasingly being touted as a valuable way to provide practical real-world experience while giving something back to the community. At the same time, such learning can be very challenging because, unlike standard assignments, it doesn’t come with a specific set of instructions. Students and faculty members have to feel their way along.

This was certainly the case with a recent class project (Fall 2007) involving students in Geography 346: Urban Growth Management. Residents of South Wellington, a rural community between Cedar and the Nanaimo Airport, had contacted the chair of the Geography Department seeking help in preparing for the upcoming Official Community Plan Review process for Nanaimo Regional District’s ‘Area A.’ I thought this would be a good project for his students.

The first challenge was to become familiar with the area and to find out from residents what the key issues and concerns were. Early on in the semester, a bus was booked to take the students out into the field, starting with an impromptu meeting at the fire hall, where several residents came out to share their views with students and later escort them on a tour of the area.

Then, assisted by community development specialist, Bernie Jones, a more formal community meeting was organized where residents prioritized their values, issues, and community attributes they were most proud of through a “hot dot” exercise, and then met with students in small groups to discuss where to go next. This meeting enabled students to refine the topics they were beginning to research in their working groups. As a result, at the next community meeting, they were able to present their findings in a PowerPoint format and to answer questions and hear comments based on their work.

The final written report, with all the working groups’ contributions, was nearly 50 pages long, and dealt with water and environment issues, rural quality of life and agriculture issues, and industrial zoning and how residents could optimize participation in the Official Community Plan review. The report looked at problems, but also offered a number of innovative possible solutions, with examples of where they had been employed.

Where the students were particularly able to bring value added was in demystifying the planning process by showing how the OCP review process had worked in other areas, and how residents had been able to influence the outcome. They were also able to uncover data relevant to community concerns, to help the community clarify its values and aspirations, and to suggest possible means by which a rural community could reinvent itself in the face of inevitable change.

Through the efforts of student Julian Bakker, a web site for the community was created where student materials are in the process of being posted, and where community members can post notices, organize discussions, and develop a fuller picture of the community — past and present — through words, pictures and video clips.

Krista Seggie, chair of the South Wellington and Area Community Association (SWACA) wrote in a letter of thanks after the term ended: “The members of SWACA were impressed with the insight that the students showed and inspired by their comments and ideas. Having the experience of working directly with the students illustrated the potential for future cooperation. Certainly a benefit of having a University-College in our region is the opportunity to utilize the knowledge of students while providing hands-on projects.” While extra work, these kinds of community-based learning projects produce positive dividends for students and communities alike.

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