

Student Teaching Assistantship Proposal

Planning for Sustainability: Revisioning the American Dream in Metropolitan Orlando

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Introduction:

The ACS Alliance for the Environment has four objectives, and this project will focus on two: 1) To change the way people think about the natural world by enhancing the curriculum and academic programs at its member institutions; 2) To influence constructively the broader society by increasing environmental awareness and by attacking and solving preeminent environmental problems.

Description:

Environmental Studies 289, *Nature in the City*, analyzes the evolution of American civic culture in response to changing perceptions of nature and the city. An amazing prosperity has inundated American life and culture, but the question remains—*to what end?* Have we invested wisely in our community capital? Has the proliferation of malls, credit cards, advertising, and consumption been matched by a meaningful civic life? Is the proliferation of gated subdivisions the product of fear, a concern for safety, or simply a gimmick to sell “exclusive” homes? Is Columbine an isolated incident or a hint of a growing pathology stemming from suburban isolation? What happens when road rage intensifies, will it spill into other aspects of communal life?

An examination of the American community cannot escape the suburb. While suburban life defines the American Dream, the suburbanization of America has fostered a host of problems: traffic congestion, accelerated pollution levels, diminishing water supplies, loss of green space, visual blight, a profusion of strip malls, and vast tracts of housing designed for autos at the expense of pedestrians, teens, and the elderly. Can we redesign our communities to protect natural resources and elevate our civic life?

The New Urbanism has resurrected the tradition of American civic design to build more pedestrian-oriented communities along natural lines. Given the plethora of growth problems plaguing Metropolitan Orlando, it is hardly surprising that the region hosts a series of New Urbanist experiments. Moreover, a far-reaching New Urbanist regional plan, *Orlando Region 2050*, was completed this summer. Renowned regional planner Jonathan Barnett headed the project, directing students from the City & Regional Planning Department at the University of Pennsylvania.

Funded by the Greater Orlando Chamber of Commerce, *Orlando Region 2050* is a rich 128-page document outlining an alternative to the present development pattern that makes Orlando one of the most “sprawl threatened” cities in the United States. The plan makes provision for the additional 4.2 million people the region is expected to attract, but

future population is placed in a New Urbanist design pattern. Development is clustered, there are transportation options, and an additional 850,000 acres of natural lands would be purchased for preservation. If this plan were implemented it would save an estimated \$66 billion in infrastructure costs. The key, of course, is whether the region will shift from the status quo and reinvision the American Dream.

Jessica Jarrett will work with me in presenting the *Orlando Region 2050 Plan* and help design the student analysis of the plan. The first two texts in the course, David Brooks, *On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now and in the Future Tense* and Frumkin, Frank and Jackson *Urban Sprawl and Public Health: Designing, Planning and Building Communities* will set the stage for presenting an alternative to Orlando's current pattern of sprawl development. Jessica worked with me this summer on a faculty-student research grant, in which we analyzed key indicators to assess the "sustainable health" of Greater Orlando. Building on this work, Jessica will present the three key sections of the *Orlando Region 2050 Plan*.

1. The Green Infrastructure

The green infrastructure is the natural system that protects the region's water supply, retracts floodwaters and maintains our quality of life. Pristine sections of the t Wekiva and St. Johns River are the system's foundation and, through the acquisition strategy identified in the 2050 plan, new reserves can connect and buffer these resources while trails and bike paths would provide access. Besides accessing natural gems, bike systems are planned to connect community parks and schools. In addition to provide safe travel for children, "greenways: offer much-needed exercise regimens for American's most obese cohort, our children.

2. Physical Health

Obesity rates have doubled since 1962, even more troubling is that Americans are becoming overweight at a younger age. Exercise comes naturally for children in walkable neighborhoods they can safely navigate. While 8- percent of parents walked or biked to elementary school, only 20 percent of their children do. This problem is especially acute in Orlando, where miles of commercial strips and vast tracts of subdivisions designed for the auto have helped produce the nation's highest pedestrian death rate. This sad fact especially impacts children. When kids cannot visit friends, a park, or the library without parental chauffeurs they are deprived of the most elemental social experiences. Moreover, as they turn inward to a fluorescent screen a cacophony of commercialism drowns out the desire to pursue more vigorous activities. It is small wonder that child obesity has reached epidemic proportions. Like many social problems it is the product of addiction, the lure of an auto-oriented lifestyle that trades health and vitality for convenience.

3. Transportation System

The region's highway and road system, already overburdened, will not be able to manage the traffic generated by an addition 4.2 million new residents over the next 45 years. The Penn Design team offered an alternative scenario, utilizing high speed rail, light rail, bike trails, and higher-density, clustered development designed for pedestrian use.

Students will analyze one of these three components of the plan for their final paper. Jessica would work with me on all aspects of this final five-week period, presenting the plan, designing the final assignment, participating in project discussion sessions, and helping lead field trips. I also plan on bringing in professional expert to address each of the three major areas and I am hoping Jessica will help in preparing students and participating in the question and answer sessions.

Five Week Class Schedule for Orlando Region 2050 Plan

Week One: Plan Overview and Perspective of Planning in Orlando since Disney.

Week Two: Green Infrastructure, Natural Environment in 2050

Week Three: Beyond Road Rage: Can Floridians Live with the Auto as an Option not a Necessity?

Week Four: New Urbanist Neighborhoods, A Healthy Choice?

Week Five: Review, Final Assignment Completion.

Jessica will be employed for the entire semester, but her focus will be on the final five weeks. I anticipate she would earn a full \$1000 stipend. In addition to at least four presentations, she will have to do outside research and help me organize a new component of the course. I would see this work easily coming into the 150 hour range (10 hours a week) for the entire semester.

Assessment

Jessica will present at least four power point presentations on the *Orlando Region 2050 Plan*. I expect this to be of sufficient quality that I can use them in future classes and in my community presentations.