

A NEW URBAN VISION

Helping the city revitalize its core



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—Marc Dohan,
Executive Director,
NewVue Communities

Left: Architectural design student
Daniel Fitzpatrick '16 envisioned a new
multi-story restaurant and performance
space along Pearl Street.

Fitchburg State students and faculty are playing an active role in a multi-agency effort to improve the quality of life in our host community.

A coalition of agencies is working to revitalize a key section of Fitchburg with the ReImagine North of Main project, and Fitchburg State is playing a key role. Through the university’s Douglas and Isabelle Crocker Center for Civic Engagement, students and faculty are helping reinvigorate the diverse and densely populated neighborhoods north of Main Street.

Leaders of the ReImagine group include representatives from City Hall, the university, the Fitchburg Public Schools, NewVue Communities and the Montachusett Opportunity Council. They share a dedication to improving the quality of life in the neighborhood, focusing on public safety, economic development and entrepreneurship, education, housing, health and community engagement. The end result of the effort will be a reimagined North of Main neighborhood where people want to live, work, play and invest.

Professor David Weiss, the director of the Crocker Center, said this long-term, ongoing project serves the center’s mission and objectives by directly involving students in civic learning, community-based research and internships, and by further working toward the greater good of community revitalization and economic development in our North of Main neighborhood.

“Having academic experts and students, in tandem with housing officials and other community leaders, develop standardized procedures for assessing residential housing and other neighborhood resources, will allow future students, leaders and officials to implement the same assessment process throughout the course of the next several years, thereby observing trends and challenges in this and other Fitchburg neighborhoods,” Weiss said.

The student contributions to the program involved labor-intensive data collection and number crunching, using old-fashioned shoe leather and the latest mapping technology to help policymakers get a better sense of the conditions on the ground in the North of Main project area.

Students Kayla Kress and Samuel Gallagher completed semester-long, paid internships for the project with Professor Jane Huang from the Earth and Geographic Sciences Department. Poring over maps of the project area, Kress and Gallagher applied layers of data such as crime statistics and property vacancy information. The time-intensive geographic information system work also included updating the maps themselves, clarifying the actual locations of buildings within property lines for the most accurate, large-scale picture of the neighborhood imaginable.

Kress, a senior, said she was intrigued by finding correlations between interconnected systems such as crime statistics and property vacancies. Collating the diverse information into cohesive maps also demonstrated the

importance of consulting multiple sources of data for any complex project like this, she said.

"It's nice to use real-world data and apply it to a project like this," said Gallagher, who starts his sophomore year this fall.

Huang was impressed by her students' performance, but not surprised. "I handpicked them for this," she said. "They've been very devoted and doing a great job."

Professor Keith Chenot's students in upper level architectural design courses were also recruited into the effort. Using a survey developed in consultation with the city and Huang's students, they were dispatched into the project area to take photographs and record observations about the conditions of buildings and surrounding infrastructure. Chenot added a few questions of his own to give the students an opportunity to test their skills analyzing architectural styles.

"Reading a building or a sequence of buildings, you can tell a lot about a neighborhood," Chenot said.

One of the students on the project was Daniel Fitzpatrick, who graduated in May with a degree in industrial technology. Fitzpatrick said it was illuminating to take such a detailed look at the neighborhood and chronicle its challenges, including what he said appeared to be a preponderance of absentee landlords with little concern about the conditions of their properties.

The information gleaned from the surveys was combined with the GIS information prepared by Huang's students.

The next step for Chenot's class was a more creative one. The students were invited to prepare their own designs for possible alternate uses for sites within the North of Main footprint. Their designs had to be ecologically friendly and take into account the

needs of the existing population. The results included lavish designs for coffee houses and performance spaces, as well as recreation centers and daycare facilities, among others.

He encouraged his students to think about the opportunities and challenges of "planning in place," and to consider how their design choices can inform the greater good. "Look at the total picture," Chenot said. "Buildings last a long time."

Fitzpatrick considered several possible new uses for property along Pearl Street between Myrtle and Highland avenues, ultimately designing a café and entertainment venue. "This project was by far my most detailed and best computer model I have ever made," he said. "It gave me insight of what I can do just by putting in some time and effort trying to make everything perfect." His computerized renderings of the would-be edifice include exterior views as well as interior designs of furnished spaces, down to lighting fixtures and floor tiles.

Fitzpatrick's design was unveiled with his peers' at an end-of-semester showcase that was attended by Fitchburg Director of Housing and Development Liz Murphy.

"The work the students were able to complete will help the city's Problem Property Task Force better target blight elimination and neighborhood revitalizations in the coming months and year," Murphy said. "Improving the neighborhood and addressing problem properties is also one of the goals the ReImagine North of Main partnership has undertaken



Fitchburg State students Kayla Kress, left, and Sam Gallagher, right, worked with Professor Jane Huang to develop detailed maps of the project area.



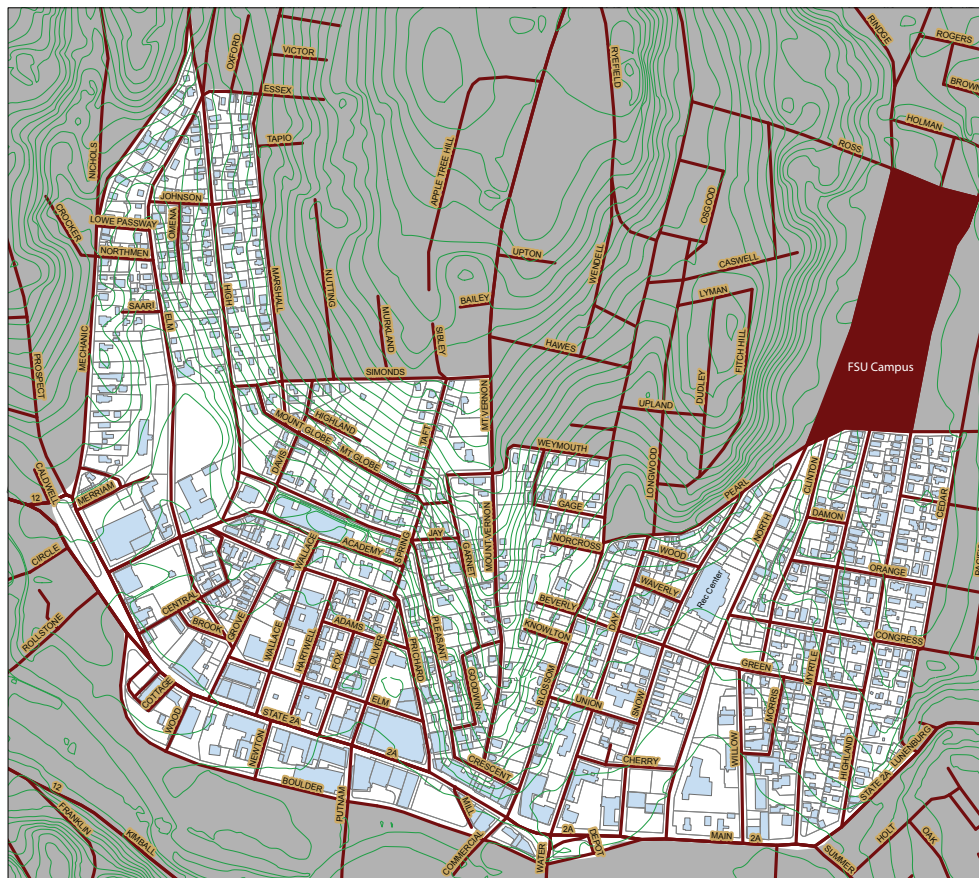
to improve the overall quality of life for residents in this area. The data collected by Fitchburg State and the Crocker Center will be an asset to those combined efforts.”

“It’s been great that the Crocker Center has agreed to join the efforts to ReImagine North of Main,” said Marc Dohan, executive director of NewVue Communities. He called the combined efforts of the students’ visiting, cataloguing and photographing hundreds of properties “a huge win” for the project, while the students working on the GIS component of the project helped identify “hot spots” deserving of attention.

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commitment to the long term study of North of Main will make a huge difference over time, and gives the partners in ReImagine North of Main the intellectual grounding to bring positive, dramatic change to this neighborhood,” Dohan continued.

University officials are hopeful the collaboration will serve as a model for future Crocker Center projects, providing civic learning opportunities for students as well as supporting initiatives in its host community. With the semester complete, Huang and Chenot will assess the project and develop standards to guide future research.



North of Main Neighborhood

- 10 ft. Contour
- Street
- Parcel
- Building Footprint

Students created hyper-detailed maps of the program area after poring over public records and performing their own analyses of building conditions.