

Our View: BSU's offer to train urban planners would fill a gap

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Professional planners play a big role in shaping the future of communities. But local governments in Idaho struggle to find qualified urban and regional planners to hire. It is encouraging to see Boise State University wants to help address the shortage.

BSU's College of Social Sciences and Public Affairs hopes to offer planning certificates beginning in fall 2006. Eventually, the college hopes to hire faculty experts in planning and to offer a master's program producing at least 25 graduates a year.

Cities, counties and agencies such as the Ada County Highway District and the Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho need trained planners to keep development orderly, anticipate problems, and help maintain quality of life.

Planners are at the forefront of change. They review development proposals to make sure they comply with local policy. They propose policies to elected officials. The results directly affect ordinary people. For example:

- How much space should cities require between sidewalks and streets, and how wide should the sidewalks and streets be? That's a planners' issue. A sidewalk that abuts a busy five-lane street is less inviting to pedestrians.
- How can local governments plan effectively to improve the lives of children, the elderly and poor people — not just people who can afford \$300,000-and-up homes? Local standards can make the difference between tacky subdivisions and attractive neighborhoods that include affordable homes.
- How can local governments balance market forces, such as those that encourage communities such as Hidden Springs and Avimor in rural Ada County, with cities' desire to manage growth to make the most efficient use of schools, roads, water and sewer service, and fire and police protection? Planners can suggest solutions.

BSU has no certified planners on its faculty. The university plans to offer certificates by tapping local planners to teach planning part-time and rolling in some faculty courses like statistics and communication, said Michael Blankenship, dean of BSU's social-sciences college. He calls that "a stopgap measure," but one that would help some people, such as local planning and zoning commission members.

The master's program would require roughly \$600,000 a year for a bare-bones program and \$1 million for an outstanding program. "We're just beginning to approach some donors," he said.

BSU should look for partnerships. The closest Idaho comes today to a graduate planning school is an architecture program at the University of Idaho's Urban Design Center in Boise, Blankenship says. However, the U of I has discussed setting up a rural or urban planning program and says it would be interested in working with BSU. "This strikes me as a wonderful opportunity where UI and BSU can join together in providing an even more powerful program for the needs of Idaho," U of I president Tim White has said.

BSU also should consider the advice of Anna Borchers Canning, Meridian's planning director, to involve certified planners in developing the program and to seek the imprimatur of a professional accreditation board.

Having qualified planners will not meet all local needs. Ethical behavior, a devotion to public service, and a willingness to act in the community's best interests are vital to successful planning. An improved attitude about customer service has made ACHD a much different agency than it was when critics sought to dissolve it in 2002, said David Turnbull, the president of Brighton Corp., a developer.

But local governments cannot plan effectively without qualified planners. BSU's proposed programs could fill a regional need.

Learn more

To find out more about BSU's plans to launch the Institute for Urban and Regional Planning, call the College of Social Sciences and Public Affairs at 426-3776.