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Students to map Maple Road's future

BY MEGAN PENNEFATHER
STAFF WRITER

Before last week, 22-year-old Amar Patel had never stepped foot in Troy.

This week, he'll start helping design part of its future.

"I don't know much about Troy, because I'm not from Michigan," said Patel, an architecture senior at Lawrence Technological University in Southfield. "For me, literally, it was a first impression."

He's one of several students at both LTU and Walsh who will be putting forth a comprehensive future design plan for the struggling Maple Road corridor, so isn't it kind of a detriment that he and most of the other students aren't even connected to the city?

Not necessarily, said LTU professor Dr. Joongsub Kim, whose studio design class will help create a future layout for the corridor. After all, there are no pessimistic predictions, no political stakes, no biased memories.

"All we have to worry about is, do we have fresh ideas, good ideas?" Kim said as he scanned his class of architecture students.

The Troy Chamber of Commerce is sponsoring the Maple Road corridor study and design plan project, which is expected to yield a published study and plan by the semester's end in May.

MBA students and marketing majors from Walsh College in Troy will handle the technical end of the operation, collecting data and talking to business owners and residents about how to enhance economic viability and promote appropriate land use.



James Willer, an architecture senior, and Jawan Matti, architecture graduate student, will be among those helping to design a plan for the Maple Road corridor.



Professor Joongsub Kim's design students will help create a plan to redevelop and enhance the Maple Road corridor. The project is a joint project between Lawrence Tech, Walsh College, the city and the Troy Chamber of Commerce.

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Ted Wilson, a chamber board member who's heading up the project, thinks pairing the seemingly disparate specialties of design and business will lead to well-rounded and dynamic plan.

"They're entirely different disciplines," he said. "When you bring two disciplines together, you can really get some great ideas."

"We're really excited because it gives Walsh the opportunity to help the community as well as giving our students real-world experience," said Linda Wiechowski, assistant vice president of academic affairs for Walsh.

The real world is beckoning for pretty much all the students involved, since most of them are seniors who are using the Maple Road study as their final project before graduating.

"Most of the projects they do in school are hypothetical projects," Kim said. "In this case, you have an actual project. Things are very fluid; you never know what you'll run into."

For starters, students will have a deadline, and they'll also have to work with people who not only know nothing about planning and architecture, but who may vehemently disagree with their ideas. "It will be an awesome cultural shock," said Kim.

Indeed, but one for which the students are ready. At a recent studio class, they threw around preliminary ideas for the corridor while they awaited a meeting with the Maple Road project's steering committee, which includes chamber President Michele Hodges, Troy Planning Director Mark Miller and Troy Planning Commission Chairman and LTU alumnus Thomas Strat.

Jawan Matti, a master architecture student from Sterling Heights, thinks the corridor would be ideal to display some of the city's diversity.

On the east side, she began, there's the Polish Cultural Center. "That's great, but why can't we incorporate other cultures in there?"

"I feel like (Maple Road) has a lot of potential," she continued. "I just think it needs to empower some elements. ... There are a lot of vacant buildings that could be rebuilt."

Patel thinks it needs a viable downtown area. "It's good to have a downtown because it gives you a focal point."

With Maple Road traditionally a center for auto supply shops and industry, it's important to embrace the rapidly changing economic landscape, added Matti.

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"We are the Motor City and they wanted us to drive cars," she said, saying Maple Road can be salvaged by "realizing we're losing the auto industry and we realize it's going to change. ... (Maple Road) goes under the radar. Maybe the corridor needs some work to complement the major vibrant areas."

Walking up to greet Patel last week before the steering committee meeting, Strat said he's certain the students will produce a plan of first-rate quality.

"I'm also a product of LTU, so they're going to do a good job," Strat said, chuckling as he shook Patel's hand. "This is their major, so they're going to have red eyes."

Last week, the students took a SMART bus tour of the corridor, scanning the area's downsides (a nearly 30 percent commercial building vacancy rate) and upsides (the Midtown Square planned unit development).

"We wanted to show them all the influences that could affect the Maple Road corridor," said Strat. "They will be going on their own now and photographing (the corridor). They have a lot of work to do."

Hodges thinks the students are up to it.

"We're pleased to be the genesis behind (the project)," she said. "It's pulling together a great team of people for a very substantive goal that will have measurable impacts for the community. ... It helps enrich the education of the ... students which is a very important goal we need to give them in return for their professional services."

While the educational benefits may be clear, Patel knows he's part of something a little bigger than a school assignment.

He said that, if the Maple Road corridor continues its steady decline, "there is a possibility of a domino effect for the whole city, he said. "It's good that (Troy officials) see that. Troy's doing a good thing. They're trying to fix it now rather than later."

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