

Building a better looking London

By BEN BENEDICT, The Londoner

Lorne Avenue School students Henrik Hey and Tyler Ross check out a map of their neighbourhood created as part of a placemaking project at the school. The students think their neighbourhood needs a new park using part of the CN Rail yard at the corner of Quebec and Elias streets.



BEN BENEDICT PHOTO

Planning, placemaking and urban design are increasingly making their way into the language of Londoners as the community seeks a better way to build a dynamic and creative city that's safe, sustainable and liveable.

But while the city's planning staff may be up to speed, the rest of us may require a bit of learning. That schooling began earlier this month with a presentation to city council but also with Andrea Sinclair's Grade 3 and Dave Vanstenkiste's Grade 7-8 students at Lorne Avenue School, 723 Lorne Ave.

While the school program was initiated through the urban development program of Western's geography department, planners from the city were integral along with the support of the Old East Village Business Improvement Association and the Middlesex County Planning Department.

Beginning with World Town Planning Day in early November, students made maps of their neighbourhood, then led guided tours to record routes and took photos of the environmental features they liked and didn't about their neighbourhood.

John Fleming, the city's manager of implementation, planning and development, sees both training opportunities as critical to the future development of London.

"We have been on a mission to change culture so that the urban design upgrade is at the forefront," he says. "We realize there are many people involved in creating the communities that are actually built in our city and each one plays a big role. You can't expect the outcomes to change unless all those players are at the table."

"Getting out into the schools is a part of that. I also talked a lot about education in my first presentation to city council. The leaders of the future are in our schools now."

At Lorne Avenue School, green and play space was key in all the children's presentations that focused on three areas including the school yard, the parking lot behind Banting House on Queens Ave, and the CN Rail Yard at Quebec and Elias streets.

Janet Loebach, a doctoral candidate in geography at Western noted: “No one ever asks the students about how to improve their neighbourhood so they’re excited. There are several natural barriers like major roads in the area.”

Ms. Sinclair noted the risks but also the potential for youth in the Old East area that has become a beacon for young London families.

“When the kids were talking about re-development and the rail site came up, and they all realized it was not a place to go, but they wanted to make a portion of it kid friendly,” Ms. Sinclair said.

That level of comfort and liveability is the message that Mr. Fleming wants council and London’s development industry to not only hear, but also to take to heart.

“Everything we’ve done, rather than as regulators and talking about what’s great about our community, is much less threatening and allows us to move forward in talking to our planners, administration group, utility operators, builders and even the market (Londoners) itself. It’s been a great three-year exercise,” Mr. Fleming says.

“We’ve seen some changes in council’s support from the urban design program and the hiring of an urban designer. Another is the urban design steering committee. Our engineering group has also initiated discussions on streetscapes. Not just streets but streetscapes and the impact of design. They’re talking about alternative design standards that will support a design concept. We’ve seen our subdivision planners thinking about community building as opposed to simply subdivisions like where communities meet, how walk-able are they and how they interact. Our park planners are now willing to consider parklets. The other area where there’s been a shift is in the development industry. We’re working together to create better communities.”

Council’s current class schedule began Nov. 12 with a presentation on placemaking guidelines that focus on the physical context of the development proposed, the community vision, a concept plan, the development of a sense of place and the designing of the public realm in relation to the other factors in order to create strong pedestrian environments.

“It’s getting to the burning issues and opportunities that we’ll lose if we don’t act before council. The placemaking guidelines move towards developing this framework by establishing key goals. It’s almost like a recipe book for creating a community that has a sense of place, is supportive of social interaction and is healthy and sustainable,” Mr. Fleming says.

Last Monday, the presentation focused on the process of re-designing the Summerside community in partnership with Z Group.

“We’re calling Z Group our Smart Growth partner,” Mr. Fleming says. “This is all a demonstrative process and is not engaged in the approval process. There’s a separate subdivision process that they will have to go through. We don’t expect them to adopt this carte blanche but some elements of it. To do a demonstrative project we had issues about how aggressive we’d be. Should we be pragmatic, as if we were developers creating something profitable, or do we push the boundaries?”

“The good part of this is that these components are all real somewhere. We’re looking at the cost of construction from a municipal operating perspective on the two plans (before and after the urban re-design). It’s the beginning of the discussion but what it shows is a much nicer community.”

The final class, this time around, will be on Monday, Dec. 10 and will describe the sustainable design elements of the London energy efficiency project (LEEP for short).

“We’ll present a spin off of the placemaking project to the realm of sustainability focusing on the green component of the community. We’ve used \$180,000 in placemaking funds to leverage green municipal funds from Natural Resources Canada to work with the London Home Builders Association to test the feasibility of using alternative energy construction in new housing,” Mr. Fleming says. “A second piece of that LEEP is looking at the Summerside project one more time with a heightened level of green technology and sustainability.”

London is in the right place with the right industrial and technological mix to make it all happen.

“The National Research Council of Canada has made a budget pitch to establish an innovative building institute here in London. The point is the green technology only works if you have industry manufacturing the pieces so people and builders have the tools to use. The federal government is looking to London to be a leader in this technology,” Mr. Fleming says. “We need a framework in place that can support an urban design program. You have to be learning about different understandings of what is good and what is not. We need to work with Council and establish those critical goals and objectives that we all need to be working towards and ensuring that we entrench that in policy so that everybody is on the same page.”

Perhaps they should be asking the students at Lorne Avenue School for some guidance.