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Clemson class plans to transform downtown Spartanburg

Group will work to revitalize downtown

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A Clemson University architecture class will have plenty to work with this semester as it attempts to help transform a key area of downtown Spartanburg.

A large contingent of individuals representing Spartanburg from both the public and private sectors turned out this past week in the Denny's building auditorium to share their vision with the Clemson students and professor Yuji Kishimoto of the possibilities for revitalizing the area. "Spartanburg Rising," the name of the class' semester project, will focus on a narrow, two-mile strip bounded by Country Club Road, Union and Pine streets, encompassing the Mary Black Foundation Rail Trail and an area organizers think could support sustainable mid-rise development.

The class will take the feedback they heard from the community and begin developing a concept and eventual sketch of the area. It is the 10th year Kishimoto's class has chosen a section of Spartanburg for similar projects, but the professor said last week's public meeting was the best by far with the largest turnout.

"What's different this time is it started with a meeting with stakeholders, so rather than just students coming with pie-in-the-sky ideas and plopping them down in front of the community, I think it has the potential to be a more meaningful project and, hopefully, it sparks some ideas and helps people develop a vision that they may have been struggling with up to this point," said Shelley Robbins, project coordinator for Upstate Forever.

"We all know that the Rail Trail is a good thing, but we're trying to kind of figure out how it fits into the big picture, how it connects to everything else that's going on, and I think the students can help us with that. It's always good to have fresh ideas."

Feedback from the audience ranged from linking both sides of the railroad tracks -- which several said acts as a "dividing line" between "good and bad" in the community -- to breathing life into the area on Union Street that some called unsightly and "rundown."

"I think it's a great project because I'm relatively new to the community, and I drive that stretch of Union Street quite often, and often think to myself of the potential along there," said Bill Joslin of McMillan Smith & Partners, one of several local architects at the meeting. "I think the key word is connectivity. And it needs to work both from a lineal fashion but also crossways to link the two areas on both sides. Personally, I think it has great potential."

Elizabeth Miraziz, a 2005 Dorman High graduate, was one of several local Clemson students who were listening.

"I'm really excited about this project because everyone here was from the Spartanburg community talking about rebuilding and revitalizing Spartanburg, and I'm one of them, so it's nice to be part of the design process," Miraziz said. "Everybody here came from a different side or point of view, and you kind of have to connect everybody together. It's pretty difficult, but I like everybody's ideas."

One of those ideas that came from a handful of Clemson architectural graduates was for the project to take advantage of Spartanburg's college-town presence by designing places targeting local college students. Miraziz said that was her favorite suggestion, since most local college students she knows head to Greenville to shop, socialize and party on the weekend.

"That's sad," she said, "because I would rather stay here -- it's closer and it's safer after going out to just come back home. So that's definitely something we want to work on, but at the same time, you want to counteract it with the people who want to keep (Spartanburg) nice and quiet and safe for everybody. So you don't want to do too much, but at the same time you still want to have some fun."
