

B-CC: The Center of Urban Planning

BY EVAN WARNER

The Urban Land Institute (ULI) is a nonprofit organization focusing on research and education that helps to create and sustain diverse communities around the globe. The organization's principal objective is to publish research and offer the public best practices related to local land-use policies across the globe. Spanning over the Americas, Asia Pacific, and Europe, there are currently over 40,000 members. ULI works to bring together industry personnel like property owners, investors, developers, contractors, planners, students, and others to create a commitment of improving standards, and find the best use of a piece of land, as well as following strong practices and morals.

Margit Nahra, Director of UrbanPlan for ULI Washington and former government teacher at B-CC, has a strong passion for her job. "It combines all of these things I love -- law, government, teaching and shaping the built environment." The UrbanPlan program at B-CC is one of the largest centers of the program. "[B-CC teaches] UrbanPlan to over 200 students a year, [and by] comparison, our other three local high schools combined have only about 75 UrbanPlan students this year," said Nahra.

Nahra cites the biggest take away from the program is how all the intricate jobs and services work together to create the environment around us, how each aspect is important, and why we must understand them. "Our built environment doesn't just happen by accident; it is a consequence of myriad decisions by all kinds of stakeholders, and the better we all understand the process and participate in it, the better our communities will be for all of us."

The UrbanPlan project started at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School in the spring of 2002. Originally, it was included

in the Economics curriculum offered at B-CC but was switched to the National, state, and local (NSL) government course.

"[It was] a great concluding activity for the 'L' of NSL," said Mr. Zehner, a social studies teacher who has taught at B-CC for over 20 years.

"It really gives kids a flavor for how decisions are made on [the] local level about the way their neighborhoods will look, with the Purple Line and all the major construction going on in [the community], kids can see the relevance of the programs." The Purple Line, the new light rail line currently being constructed will cut through a large portion of the surrounding areas near Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School.

Not only does UrbanPlan take what NSL has taught during the year and put it into one final project, but it also helps to build teamwork and leadership skills. It is a hands-on activity that involves the community and demonstrates practicality and professionalism.

Mr. Gilmore, another social studies teacher at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School, spoke highly of the UrbanPlan, specifically regarding how B-CC has begun to expand the program for students outside of NSL to allow them the opportunity to participate. "We did a week-long summer program last summer for 15 rising seniors that had not done the program in NSL," said Gilmore.

Evan Weisman, the Executive Vice President of Donohoe Development, manages a team working to construct new projects in the Washington, D.C. area. Weisman has been involved with ULI since 2005. "Even if the career is not of interest in the end, great life skills are learned, and everyone can participate in real estate projects as a local stakeholder with a newfound knowledge of the projects happening all around them."

The only major difference between the summer program and the one during the school

year is the timeframe in which it takes place. During the summer, it is much more condensed and allows other opportunities like site visits. "ULI's goal is to reach as many participants as possible, and [the UrbanPlan summer program] is one way to do that," said Weisman.

The feedback from students who have participated in UrbanPlan has also been positive with an overall liking to UrbanPlan and what it has taught them.

Ahmed Amari, a sophomore at B-CC, said that he had a great time working on the project and that with it, students were able to actively participate. "I got to learn new things and experience a career path I never thought of before. By physically working on the project and getting feedback from real professionals I got a deeper understanding," said Amari. Another student who shared similar positive views of UrbanPlan was senior Allison Welch. "[There was] a good balance of learning and having fun." Welch further added that by using legos, the students were able to enjoy themselves while maintaining a serious attitude.

UrbanPlan is a different way to teach the fundamentals and functions of local government and the detailed work that goes into the planning of our communities. "I think that every government class should participate in the project due to its values and different hands-on method of teaching an otherwise [less interesting] concept," said junior Gabe Scheck.

The project allows for an end of year summarization of what had been taught over the last several months, giving the opportunity for students to see what a real-world situation in this field may look like all while allowing the students to not feel overwhelmed as most schoolwork does.