

COMMUNITY

Lakeview Elementary students redesign the Northside

By Anita Weier

Northside News

The next time the Northside takes on the difficult task of updating a Neighborhood Plan, perhaps we should turn to fourth- and fifth-graders at Lakeview Elementary School.

Susan Hobart's class is using a computer game from the University of Wisconsin-Madison to redesign the Northside. The Urban Science game simulates elements of the urban planning process to teach middle school and high school students how to think like urban planners.

The students have been divided into four teams — equal opportunities, green space, business and Northside neighbors.

Each team has learned that if they make a change in a zoning map in the computer game, other effects will occur. For instance, if manufacturing is increased to provide jobs, there may be less green space. Or if green space is added, more sandhill cranes would likely appear.

"More green space makes neighborhood character better," said Bryn Bennett-Feinblatt, a fifth-grader on the green space team.

Azir Pate, a fourth-grader also on that team, explained — as he casually replaced my home with wetlands — that he likes nature.

Sydney Walter, a fifth-grader on the business team, said the group was trying to balance the desires of interested parties, who are "stakeholders" provided by the computer game. For instance, one wanted more businesses so people could live near their jobs, and another wanted more traffic to get more sales.

The computer game lets students play the role of interns at Urban Design Associates, an urban and regional planning firm. Students take eight to 10 hours to play through an online notebook that can be shared with peers. Specialized mapping software allows them, with



Fifth-grader Pangdee Thao works on her computer redesigning the Northside.

instructions from computer-generated characters, to learn about the history of the neighborhood and issues of community concern. Mapping tools allow the students to change the zoning of various parcels. The students suggest changes they think "stakeholders" would support.

After the teams integrate and adjust their recommendations, the students will write a final proposal this month to be presented to the Northside Planning Council and the mayor of Madison. During the last school year, Mayor Dave Cieslewicz visited the class to learn how the students would redo State Street. (It turned out that they suggested much the same things as the current State Street plan, except with more green space.)

"Kids who are nine and 10 are ready for this. We underestimate their critical thinking skills," Hobart said.

Part of the students' experience was a presentation by NPC Board member Char Tortorice, who explained the lengthy process involved in the recent update of the plan for our area. "People were dedicated enough to go to a meeting once a week for two years, and

they did a lot of dreaming," she said. A lot had changed since the last plan in 1992, so they had to take that into consideration.

For instance, the economy has changed and some businesses closed. And more people are riding bicycles.

Tortorice closed her presentation by stressing that Northsiders love their community, but that the area has a less than wonderful reputation outside the Northside.

"People from other areas of town have said this is a tired area, a Rust Belt, and they judge it on the litter and traffic from Rhythm and Booms," she said. "They don't know how beautiful our neighborhood is."

Photo by Anita Weier

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