

# U of A responds to community



(Edmonton) Economic development in Alberta has received a boost from the University of Alberta, with a new community planning program that will help to fill a critical need in the province, while building a better future for Albertans, says Robert J. Summers, acting director of the recently established Community Planning Program.

Summers says that the new undergraduate program (accessible through the faculties of arts and science) will produce outstanding planners to work in Canada and throughout the world. The program will help address the current shortage of professional planners in Alberta where the scarcity of planners stymies development, he says, and can result in projects that fail to achieve their full potential to improve the quality of life for Albertans.

Summers says that only a few planners are currently being trained in Alberta and that this means the high demand for planners in the province is being met by bringing them in from elsewhere in Canada and the world.

“New planners tend to come to Alberta where we have a lot of economic growth and development going on, they work here for two or three years. They get experience and then return home,” he says.

“The shortage of experienced planners slows the pace of development and impacts the overall quality of the developments that are completed. We have to live with these developments for 50 to 100 years, so it’s critical to do a good job in designing and planning them. If you have a better planning process, you end up with better developments. This is good for developers, it’s good for communities and it’s good for Alberta’s sustainability and the quality of life.”

He says that, in some areas, developments are taking up to three years just to get through the planning stage. The delays frustrate developers. “That’s bad because developers may consider options in other places because development costs go up while they wait,” he says. “And the situation is not only frustrating for developers but also for citizens involved in the planning process, who find themselves dealing with overworked and under-experienced planners.”

Summers says cities around the world have recognized that to be competitive in a global market, they need to provide outstanding quality, a necessity for attracting innovative professionals. “Ensuring a good quality of life and an amazing urban environment that’s vibrant, enjoyable and pleasant is key to economic growth,” he says.

“Cities are not simply a machine for living. People are much more complex; we need a good quality of life, and so when we talk about planning, we’re talking about quality of life, sustainability and competitiveness. We hope that the new U of A program can help communities here achieve those goals.”

Carl Amrhein, U of A provost and vice-president (academic), says that, by offering a bachelor of arts major and bachelor of science specialization in community planning, the university recognizes a need identified by the community.

“In this case, the local and regional community made it abundantly clear that there is a real desire and a real need for a university-level program to help address the cornucopia of challenges that come with modern urban and regional development,” Amrhein says.

“There are planning challenges and opportunities here in our province and establishing a planning program at the U of A makes eminent sense, consolidating and building on the interdisciplinary expertise we already have with the interdisciplinary approach and fundamental connection to the community beyond the campus,” he says. “This planning program aligns perfectly with the goals of the university.”

Amrhein says that the continuing economic growth in Alberta creates opportunities and challenges in terms of pressure on housing, infrastructure, transportation, the environment and community services. “These challenges have been particularly prevalent in our larger cities and our northern communities,” he says.

Summers agrees, saying that in Fort McMurray, for example, a shortage of planners has made it more challenging for developers and the municipality to respond to housing shortages. “It’s taking them a very long time to get the land approved for development and to move through the process of planning. The whole process is extended because of the shortage of planners who are familiar with the region and who could move things along more quickly. This simply adds to the cost of housing,” he says.

Amrhein says that the creation of the program continues the tradition at the university of making long-term investments in the province. The program will work closely with the Alberta Professional Planners Institute and the Canadian Institute of Planners. “The decisions being made today about the development of our built and natural environment will have an impact for generations,” Amrhein says.

“Through helping to address the shortage of professional planners in the province, the university seeks to contribute not only to the prosperity and sustainability of Alberta, but also to the quality of life available in our communities.”

By Michael Davies-Venn January 20, 2012

<http://www.news.ualberta.ca/article.aspx?id=461BF66C7F834411B83C18E0731BC9AE>