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## Laurier students work with City of Cambridge on urban projects

WATERLOO – A team of Wilfrid Laurier University students in Geography and Environmental Studies were awarded first prize for assessing the economic impact of streetscape improvement plans for King Street East in Preston as part of their coursework for the university's Capstone Urban Studies Project (CUSP).

The winning team, who named themselves WALKS Consulting, is made up of fourth-year students Warren Brayne, Ashley Byun, Samantha Dunlop, Lucas Piscineri and Kyla Suchovs. They are part of the inaugural CUSP course at Laurier. The senior-level course, the first of its kind at Laurier, uses a collaborative case-study approach, which challenges students to analyse and propose resolutions to urban issues within the Region of Waterloo, while bringing to bear their understanding of both human and physical geography and environmental studies.

The winning team was selected by a panel of City of Cambridge staff and Laurier alumni, and received an award of \$2,000 from private-sector donations. Key objectives of the winning case were to gauge awareness of the City's Streetscape Plan and Urban Design Guidelines, understand property owners and businesses' perceptions of benefits and challenges of the plans, and understand the utilization of the City of Cambridge's Financial Incentive Programs and downtown area streetscape plan initiatives in stimulating past and future private investment and interest in Preston Towne Centre.

WALKS Consulting's research indicated that there is a need for more awareness of the streetscape plans; however, the study found that overall, property owners and businesses are already embracing and adapting to the proposed improvements outlined in the streetscape plan. Business owners and residents express pride in the Preston downtown core, share strong connections with the vibrant and prosperous community, and are optimistic towards the economic benefits of the proposed streetscape improvements.

The City of Cambridge, which is the first client for the CUSP course, identified several other projects for the Laurier students. Some of the projects included:

- Examination of streetscape improvements in progress or planned in central Galt and Hespeler
- Planning a community project to repurpose an old transportation feature such as a parking lot
- Assessing the impact of intensification on viewsheds in the core areas of the city
- Undertaking heritage planning and developing outreach materials for historic properties such as cemeteries

Students enrolled in CUSP have pointed to the benefits of participating in a collaborative learning environment located in an actual urban context.

"The Capstone Urban Sustainability course provided us with the opportunity to use the many skills we have acquired over our university career as Geography and Environmental Studies majors in a real-world setting," said Lucas Piscineri, a member of the winning team. "It allowed me to work closely with other students in a group setting and use our individual strengths to produce a thorough assessment of the streetscape plan that was considered valuable and helpful to the City of Cambridge."

The CUSP program emerges from an increased desire to develop post-secondary programming that helps students deepen their engagement with the community. Thanks to the generosity of the city of Cambridge, Paul Puopolo, (BA '73) of Polocorp Inc. and Christopher Coupal, (BA '95) of Coupal Markou Commercial Real Estate Inc., Laurier's Department of Geography and Environmental Studies is able to offer students an opportunity to employ their unique abilities as Geography and Environmental Studies majors to gain comprehensive knowledge about the consulting process.

"I am so pleased with the success of this inaugural course," said Bob Sharpe, associate professor of Geography and Environmental Studies and an organizing force behind CUSP. "The chance for students to deploy their understanding and skills to address an issue of local immediacy, with the real possibility of affecting the resolution of that issue, provides our students with a unique and rewarding learning opportunity."

Over the coming three years, the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies will continue to develop its relationship with the City of Cambridge through the Capstone Urban Studies Project, with the next course offering available to senior-level students in winter 2016.

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