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Asheville's river district needs better connections

Friday, 15 June 2007

by *Nathan Cain*

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The key to reviving Asheville's River District is connectivity, according to a group of interns brought to Asheville by Design Workshop.

The group of 16 graduate and undergraduate students from all over the country spent 10 days in Asheville studying the riverfront district and developing a plan to revitalize the area by connecting it to Biltmore Village and downtown.

The students presented their plan on Friday, June 8 at Curve Studios in Asheville. Their recommendations included using a natural systems approach to connect the riverfront to adjacent areas. A natural systems approach, said Curtis Walls, a landscape architecture student from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical University in Greensboro, means paths will follow the natural flow of water.

The interns also recommended rerouting Riverside Drive and Swannanoa River Road, and moving buildings away from the river.

"We really wanted to push back a lot of stuff from the river so it's not an inconvenience when it floods," Walls said.

The interns looked at the River Arts District, Biltmore Village, and the area where the Swannanoa and French Broad rivers converge, which they dubbed the "confluence area."

The plan calls for parks and bike paths, as well as making the River Arts District more pedestrian friendly without compromising the area's existing look and feel.

The interns also looked at economic incentives, like subsidies and rent control to keep the area affordable for the artists who now flock there, said Shannon Scovell, a landscape architecture student from the University of Pennsylvania.





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Glenn Walters, principal at Design Workshop's Asheville office, said there were 315 applicants for this year's internship program, which is the most the firm has ever had in the 22 years it has offered the program.

"It's an amazingly talented group," he said.

Every year, Walters said, the firm picks an area for a project near one of its seven North American offices. This was the first time the internship program has been held in Asheville, he added.

Ryan Blau, project manager for the internship program, said the students' ideas would be compiled and presented to the city.

"It's an academic process and an exercise," he said. "But it's grounded in real constraints."

Now that the project is over, Walters said, the interns will fan out to Design Workshop offices all over the country, where they will work for the summer. Two of the interns will be working in the Asheville office.

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