

UNL Class Reveals Final Plan for Panama

By Christina Case
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"It all started with two blokes coming into a bar with ten thousand dollars—we've come a long way from there," said Brito Mutunayagam. After extensive planning by members of Brito's planning class at UNL, plans for a combined Panama community center and fire barn were unveiled on December 7 at the UNL School of Architecture.

It began on August 30, when VOICE publisher Bill Bryant and Village of Panama Board Chairman Eric Johnson met with Brito at a Lincoln pub to propose a partnership with students from the university. "Our little organized group had done much of our own leg work, conducting surveys for over a year and meeting on a regular basis, but we came to the point that we needed more guidance to continue on the path of building a new community center," said Bill Bryant.

Along with their request, Bryant and Johnson offered \$10,000 toward the project, much of it proceeds from the Panama Centennial celebration in August 1988. Brito agreed to work alongside the village of Panama toward their original goal of constructing a new community center, and incorporated the project into his Qualitative Methods course at UNL.

Over the next 15 weeks, the students learned the ins and outs of research and planning. During class periods they learned the basic principles, such as how to prepare for and run a meeting. Actual meetings with the Panama community on October 5 and November 9 gave them a chance to employ what they had learned in a real-life community planning project.

On October 5, the UNL students went to Panama to meet the residents and gain insight into Panama life and the overall needs of the community. They presented five areas of discussion and encouraged the attendees to respond to some suggestions and make their own. "When our students came out, the response we got back was that the community felt quite excited that something was finally beginning to happen about the center," remembered Brito. The students took what they had learned and formulated a plan over the next month, taking into account the issues they had identified as most pressing.

The class returned to Panama on November 9 to present a preliminary plan for a community center and received a very different reaction. "The community seemed to believe the community center we were presenting was unrealistic because there was not enough money," said Brito. It was back to the drawing board for the class, but

also a unique opportunity for some creative planning alternatives.

For additional help assessing the real community needs, the students interviewed Bill Bryant and Eric Johnson, the two key informants for Panama. "We listened to the students' presentation of what they had so far, and we were there to help them better understand questions they had, and whether they were on the right direction with the study," said Bryant. "Eric and I helped them narrow their direction."

The main discovery of both the November 9 meeting and the interview on November 16, was that Panama had a much greater need for a fire barn than of a stand-alone community center. If they did not jump at the chance to build the new fire barn in Panama, it would be constructed in another community within the Firth Residential Fire District.

Upon further research, the students found that funding for a fire barn would be available from the district, even if a community center were integrated with the fire barn. Even after construction, the operating and maintenance costs would be shared between the village and the fire district. "The fire barn is a Firth Fire District operation, not a Panama deal," Brito clarified. "What we are trying to do is give a persuasive argument to the fire district that Panama would be very excited to host the fire barn."

Throughout the entire planning process, one thing was made exceptionally clear to the class by the Panama community—their adamancy that a community center in Panama would be for Panama, as most other communities already have their own community center.

Brito's experience helping development in small communities has led him to firmly believe in the plucky attitude of small Nebraska towns. "Small town people in Nebraska will not let their towns die. Economically they may come across as 'not sustainable,' but our towns have survived in spite of that," he said. The semester was a thrilling one for him as he watched his students see this for themselves and adapt their vision accordingly. "A standalone community center is not feasible in Panama and the community is very aware of it. Since the students are learning planning, for them to find it out for themselves was invaluable to their education," said Brito.

The class put together a final presentation to share with the Panama stakeholders on December 7. Their proposal of an integrated fire barn and community center was met with approval from the four stakeholders present: Bryant, Johnson, Dee Harris and Dave Allen, a rural Panama resident and president of the Firth/Panama Rural Fire Board. "The project started out as a 'nearly impossible dream.' At the end of it all, the students were listening to the stakeholders ask 'What do we need to do to get this done?' The experience was priceless," said Brito.

Suggested uses for the building



Photo by UNL Extension Educator Phyllis Schoenholz

More than 20 residents attended the December 28 Panama community meeting.

included an emergency and relief shelter, as well as special events (like weddings) and regular use (for village offices or meetings). To answer concerns about covering the cost, the UNL students came up with some fund-raising ideas, including the possibility of selling some of the village assets. The time projected for the completion of the project was about two years.

A Panama Community Foundation was recently founded that will provide the much-needed leadership, for one thing. Their purposes include stemming the loss of residents, attracting new residents and businesses, and mobilizing the community and raising funds to finance community activities. "My opinion is that the construction of this one building will begin the resurgence of the Village of Panama," said Bryant, one of the incorporators of the community foundation. "Businesses are at an all time low, but Panama has plenty of potential to grow resident wise, as well as business wise. We all hope the building can be built as a disaster relief shelter, which will help solidify the importance of the Panama community."

The Panama project was of great value, not only to the community, but also to the students who invested a semester of diligent work into it.

Ashlee Dickinson heartily thanked the community for their help. "Many times we learn all about something in the classroom, yet have no idea how to apply our knowledge in the real world. The opportunity to work with a wonderful community like Panama has contributed so much to my decisions about the future," she said. Having grown up in an urban area in Connecticut, working with a small town was a new experience for Michael McGarry.

"I was very impressed with how tightly knit the Panama community was, and how passionate they were about this community center becoming a reality and something they could be proud of," he said. "As for my career, I felt it helped me with my presentation skills and it helped me deal with the people of a community on face to face basis.

There are few planning careers where this won't be a key skill to obtain and where such interaction will be asked of a planner."

Although the UNL students will move on from the project, Brito, along with UNL Extension Educators Phyllis Schoenholz and Dennis Kahl, will continue as partners with Panama on the computer/fire barn project. Brito considers the presence of the two educators as invaluable mentors and resources to the students. They were also instrumental in getting the project started in the first place. Bill Bryant originally made contact with Brito and his students through Schoenholz and Kahl, who were doing community studies in Bennet and Firth over the past year.

It is now largely up to the community of Panama to take the plan created by the students and make it a reality. With the incorporation of the Panama Community Foundation, a core group of leaders is established.

"Lancaster County has good strong communities in three of the four corners of the county in Malcolm, Denton, and Waverly. There is no reason why Panama can't be as strong, representing the southeast part of the county in the future," said Bryant.

As for Brito Mutunayagam and his students, the experience has been a pleasure. "I wanted to use the creative energies of young people to come up with solutions for small towns in need of a boost," Brito said. "Panama was a very responsive and positive community, and the students were so warmly received. The people were curious about what the students were offering, and that made the students really excited. Priceless."

The stakeholders will present the findings of the students to the entire village and rural residents of Panama on Thursday, December 28, at 7 p.m., at the newly remodeled Panama Cafe.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To access the presentation given to the Panama community on December 28, go to <http://lanaster.unl.edu/community/resources.shtml>

Master Conservationist Entries Due April 1

Nebraska adults and youth in both rural and urban areas who have implemented soil and water conservation practices are eligible to enter the 2007 Master Conservationist Recognition program. The deadline for entries is April 1. There are categories for youth groups and individuals, residences, communities and private businesses as well as production agriculture (farming and ranching). Master Conservationist program brochures are available at the UNL Extension office.

Pioneer Farm Family Award Applications Due May 1

The Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben and the Nebraska Association of Fair Managers will recognize Nebraska Pioneer Farm Families at the Lancaster County Fair. Titled "Nebraska Pioneer Farm Family Award," local recognition requires the land of a family in Lancaster County must have been owned by some member of the family for a century or more.

Applications for this year's recognition are due no later than May 1. Applications can be obtained by contacting Deanna Karmazin at 441-7180.