

Minnesota Watchdog.org

University of Minnesota sustainability project provokes taxpayer opposition

Posted By [Tom Steward](#) On September 8, 2015 @ 4:00 am

Carver County ranks as the healthiest and happiest county in Minnesota, [recent surveys](#) ^[1] show. But some residents are anything but happy over a University of Minnesota program teaming up hundreds of students with county staff to help jumpstart "sustainability-related projects."

Sustainability serves as a catch-all for research proposals on everything from alternative energy and transportation to community engagement, housing opportunity to human services and effective administration.

"We have low unemployment, low crime, we have really good schools. What is the University of Minnesota trying to make more sustainable? What does it mean? I don't even know. If anybody's sustainable, it must be us," said Tom Workman, the lone Carver County commissioner to oppose the program. "...Relative to other counties in Minnesota, we're doing pretty good."

The University selects one local government applicant every academic year to participate in what's dubbed the [Resilient Communities Project](#) ^[2]. Students gain valuable real-world experience and classroom credit, while local governments get an estimated \$400,000 to \$500,000 of in-kind graduate level and faculty expertise on locally nominated "sustainability issues and needs."

"Our local governments make decisions not in a vacuum but based on data, which is a good deal for the taxpayer," said Carver County board chair Randy Maluchnik of the [RCP program](#) ^[3] to be implemented this month. "...If they want to look at them, that doesn't mean they're going to do them. They just want to see what the practicality is."

The western Twin Cities county and six local government partners pitched 34 wide-ranging sustainability projects. The proposals include examining potential solar fields, mobile home park needs, bike and pedestrian traffic, a local ecotourism marketing plan, barriers to affordable housing and marketing transit sustainability, among others.

"We try to make sure there's a good fit between what our community partner is looking for, what they want to get out of the project," said Mike Greco, RCP co-founder and director. "But, of course, it also has to fit the needs of the person teaching the course, to make sure it meets their teaching objectives for the course."



BIG IDEAS OR BIG GOVERNMENT? Supporters say RCP provides local government with invaluable in-kind expertise on sustainability issues, but opponents contend the process inevitably leads to bigger government.

Yet proponents wound up on the defensive from critics who questioned the need for a project that will cost local taxpayers a combined \$55,000 to cover university administrative costs. Some even tied the UOM project to the [United Nations](#) ^[5] "Resilient Communities and Cities Partnership Program," prompting Maluchnik to [issue a denial](#) ^[6] of an U.N. connection.

"The 'Resilient Cities' project is simply not a good fit for Carver County and is being driven by the environmental left and other advocates of large government and social engineering," said Carver County Republican Party chair Vince Beaudette, and deputy chair Vicki Ernst, in a letter to the editor ^[7] in local papers.

University faculty say RCP previous collaborations with Minnetonka, North St. Paul and Rosemount met little or no opposition. Last year's project involved about 450 students and 20 faculty in 45 or so college courses.

"I guess I'm a little confused by some of the opposition because I don't think what people are opposing is what we're actually doing," Greco said. "There seems to be a lot of concern that the nature of the partnership is focused on climate change and there's not a single project that we're working on that's related to climate in Carver County."

The final list of projects to be implemented this fall will be whittled down by the end of the week. The City of Victoria kicked in \$2,500 for work on firefighter recruitment, water conservation, trail signage and an ecotourism marketing plan.

"I know some of the people that are raising concerns. I think when we've looked at it, we've really felt like we have complete local control over what gets enacted," said Lauri Hokkanen, Victoria city manager. "Our staff will have a lot of contact with the students and professor that are doing the work."

Nearby Watertown chipped in \$1,000 in pursuit of a marketing plan to spur housing sales and tips on how to maintain the grass on city athletic fields.

"We're a small community, small staff and any time we can partner with outside agencies or other groups to help us with our operations is a goal of the council," said Shane Fineran, Watertown city administrator.

Typically, students provide cities with [a report](#) ^[8] that's also turned in for credit, but opponents will monitor for another deliverable: bigger county and city government.

"I think elected officials ought to take a leery eye at a lot of this stuff because I think it represents why we have bloated budgets and why government grows so fast," said Workman. "This is just another government-producing program from the U of M, and most taxpayers out in Carver County probably don't have a clue."

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URLs in this post:

[1] recent surveys: <https://smartasset.com/mortgage/happiest-places-in-america>

[2] Resilient Communities Project: <http://rcp.umn.edu/2015/03/16/carver-county-selected-as-2015-2016-community-partner/>

[3] RCP program: http://www.co.carver.mn.us/departments/LWS/resilient_communities_project.asp

[4] Image: <http://watchdog.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files/2015/09/RCP-UOM-graphic.jpg>

[5] United Nations: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=1348&nr=1622>

[6] issue a denial: http://www.swnewsmedia.com/chaska_herald/news/opinion/letters_to_the_editor/commentary-great-value-from-u-of-m-project/article_fa65223a-5349-5d4b-b1da-8d1ba2c56e91.html

[7] letter to the editor: http://www.swnewsmedia.com/reject-resilient-cities-project/article_446b610f-3402-5b63-9ef4-50a9087a05b0.html

[8] a report: <http://rcp.umn.edu/home/communities/2014-2015-projects/>