How would you describe the “Sustainable Neighborhoods in Detroit” class?

This class was a cross between urban planning and sustainability. It was incredibly interdisciplinary and gathered around 25 students from across U-M, from engineering to environmental science to public policy. We spent the winter semester learning about Detroit’s history, food systems, transportation, built environment, environmental health, and culture. We also took a number of field trips to Detroit on the weekend, exploring different areas of the city.

Near the end of the semester, we started learning about the Detroit River International Crossing (DRIC) project, an effort to build a second (but publicly owned) bridge to Windsor, Ontario. It would be constructed through the neighborhood of Delray in southwest Detroit. Our task was to do field research, hold community meetings, and propose an urban plan for the neighborhood in case the bridge was built. We also had time in Detroit to soak up its diverse and interesting culture, and try to see the city beyond the common stereotypes.

In what way do you think this class differs from other field-based courses at U-M?

This class was exceptionally applicable, timely, and relevant. Because what we were doing had such “real world” applicability, instead of the usual theoretical classroom work, made for an excellent and interesting field experience. We were working on a current and pressing problem, which made us much more dedicated and involved (and class that much more fun).

What is the unique sustainability challenge in the region where you were studying?

The neighborhood of Delray is in the heart of I-75 and a number of large industrial plants. Consequently, it is in the most polluted zip code in Michigan with a toxicity score of 2576 (the median Michigan zip code score is 18). It’s also one of the poorest areas of Detroit, likely explaining why highways and industry have found little resistance. This combination made for an incredibly unique challenge.

We were wrestling with some tough questions. For example, should the new bridge project be supported because of the potential economic benefit to the area? Or should it be opposed because it will bring thousands of new vehicles through the area, resulting in even more air pollution? This dilemma made our class grapple with questions of what “sustainability” really means. For many of us, this meant looking beyond the most
commonly examined aspect of sustainability – environmental – and looking more at community and financial sustainability.

What are the most meaningful things you learned from this class?

By working directly with neighborhood residents, I learned the importance of always remembering the human side of things. Often times when we think of the big environmental challenges of our day, it’s very abstract. While nobody in Michigan would be pleased to hear about the economic and environmental challenges in Delray, it’s pretty easy for us to think, “oh, that’s unfortunate,” and then move on with our day.

By living in Detroit and getting to know the Delray residents on a personal level, it became much more personal for us. We were emotionally invested in the community, and we really wanted to help make things better for the residents.

Do you think you made an impact where you studied? If so, how?

I think we had a big effect on the community. They were incredibly excited to have us in Delray helping them, and we formed many relationships with community members. That said, the biggest impact to the community will come from the Michigan legislature. Our job was to help the residents push for a community benefits package, give them options and updated information, and provide an outlet for their thoughts and ideas on how to improve their community. I believe we were successful in doing that.

What impact do you think this experience will have on you in the long term?

Urban planning is unique in the fact it requires knowledge in such an impressive variety of areas. We had to think about the interplay of many different factors. This class was an excellent real world exercise in systems-level thinking, a valued and required skill when solving today’s complex challenges. Just as important were the personal relationships formed, with both my classmates and the residents of Delray. We also fell in love with the city of Detroit – it has so much to offer, especially for young people.

The Detroit Class was recently featured in an “Out of the Blue” Segment on the Big Ten Network. You can watch this video in the multi-media section of the Graham Institute website at www.graham.umich.edu.