

# UrbanPlan at UNBC: Teaching the Dynamics of Community Planning

Rylan Graham RPP, MCIP and  
Barnaby Mullen, PIBC Student Member

Since 2021, planning students at the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) have participated in a unique and innovative program called UrbanPlan. This program, delivered in partnership with the Urban Land Institute (ULI), is intended to “harnesses the power of experiential learning to drive students to more deeply engage in the complex nature of land-use decisions and inspire them to take an active role as engaged citizens to create better communities” (Urban Land Institute, n.d.). To achieve this important goal, students are presented with a fictional development scenario set in the imagined community of Yorktown. In this context, Yorktown’s City Council has articulated a vision to revitalize Elmwood—a neighbourhood that has experienced years of decline and disinvestment.

Working in groups, students form development firms in which each team member assumes one of five roles: site planner, financial analyst, marketing director, neighbourhood liaison, and environment and equity director. Each firm responds to the City’s request for proposals (RFP) by developing a vision and redevelopment proposal for Elmwood. While team members advocate from the perspective of their assigned role, collaboration is essential, as groups work through complex economic, social, political, and design challenges. Teams develop a vision for their proposal and bring this to fruition in developing a site plan and putting together a viable financial proforma.

While the case unfolds in a fictional setting, it offers students a realistic look into planning practice. Students learn about the roles and influence of different actors, the economic realities of

## City Council’s Goals for the Elmwood Redevelopment

1. Create housing that is attainable to a mix of income groups (very low-income, low-income, and moderate income) in addition to market rate housing;
2. Create employment opportunities for neighbourhood and city residents and increase the number of jobs offering a living wage;
3. Attract retail businesses that serve the needs—both products and price points—of neighbourhood residents;
4. Develop the city’s first EcoDistrict by promoting equity, resilience, and climate protection;
5. Contribute to the city’s plan for decarbonization by investing not only in green buildings, but also in net zero buildings;
6. Generate tax revenues for the city;
7. Create or preserve public and private amenities that enhance retired/longtime residents’ ability to age in place;
8. Address existing residents’ concerns about gentrification;
9. Create public spaces for active and passive recreation;
10. Attract investment in neighbourhoods experiencing physical and economic decline; and
11. Preserve legally designated heritage properties.

### Financial goals that must be achieved...

- I. \$9.5M return to the City of Elmwood over a period of 10 years
- II. 13.5% return to the developer to ensure that investors (and their capital) are attracted to the development

Teams respond to the RFP which outlines City Council’s goals for Elmwood



Students come together to develop a plan for Elmwood

## Elmwood District Plan

### Key Features:

- Focal point along the historic Elm street. This street will foster a space for the community to connect with services and each other.
- Historic buildings will be renovated inside and out to restore them to a safe and enjoyable environment
- Housing for each demographic
- Improved walkability
- Parks create space for people to enjoy the beauty around them
- The skate park and courts encourage young families to move into the neighbourhood

Site Plan and its key features developed by one of UNBC's teams

development, and the challenges of reconciling competing community priorities.

For example, The Old Urbanists, a group of 200 long-time residents, advocate for a greater diversity of housing types to support their goal to age in place. They also hope that a Q-Mart, a fictional chain supermarket, will be included in the plan to ensure that groceries and medication remain accessible. Conversely, the Elmwood Neighbourhood Alliance, comprised of 400 higher-income residents, strongly oppose the Q-Mart, concerned that it will increase traffic congestion and alter the neighbourhood's character. Faced with these competing perspectives, teams must determine how best to proceed and incorporate these conflicting priorities into their final plan.

To help students navigate the project's complexities, industry professionals visit the class twice during the semester to serve as facilitators. In this role, they provide feedback on each team's vision statement, site plans and proforma. The six-week project concludes with teams pitching their final proposals to a mock City Council. Much like a real Council meeting, students face challenging and pointed questions from City Councillors who bring their own values and perspectives to the conversation.

Every year, teams at UNBC present thoughtful and compelling visions for a revitalized Elmwood. The proposals often share many common elements including an emphasis on mixed-use development, pedestrian-oriented design, preservation of historic structures, plenty of public spaces, and with land uses aimed to foster inclusion and equity. At the same time, each team adds its own creativity and values to the process, resulting in distinct redevelopment concepts.

Elmwood is illustrative of many central neighbourhoods throughout Canada, where decades of disinvestment and decline have led to a new era of grand plans for redevelopment and revitalization. By engaging with a scenario that closely mirrors real-world practice, students gain insight into how market and non-market forces shape what ultimately gets approved, financed, and built. Incorporating this type of experiential learning into our curriculum at UNBC helps students better understand the complexities of planning. More importantly, it helps to prepare them, with greater confidence, to navigate those challenges as future practitioners.

## A student's experience with Urban Plan

By Barnaby Mullen, PIBC Student Member

When I began planning school three years ago, I had a general idea of what the profession involved and what a career in planning could look like. It wasn't until last year, however, that I began to connect more deeply with some of the key concepts in my program and see how they might apply in practice. Through the UrbanPlan project, I gained a better understanding of the day-to-day realities of planners including the many complex trade-offs involved in shaping communities.

One of the most challenging aspects of the project was balancing neighbourhood concerns with the need to make a development financially viable. These priorities did not always align, which made arriving at consensus difficult. The experience showed me that planning rarely presents simple problems with clear answers. Instead, planners must work through competing interests and determine how best to move forward.

My group and I also learned how financial models (pro formas) work and how different land uses, including residential, commercial, and retail, can be combined in ways that respond to both community goals and municipal objectives. Just as important were the lessons that came from working as part of a team. Each group member took on a specific role, which meant we had to communicate our ideas and knowledge clearly while also making room to understand the perspectives of others.

At times this was not easy. There were moments when our ideas clashed, but those conversations helped us work toward compromises that initially seemed difficult to achieve. Learning how to listen to others and adjust our ideas accordingly was an important part of the process.

The hands-on elements of the project also made the experience particularly engaging. Using physical blocks to map out development ideas allowed us to visualize our proposals and brought a creative aspect to the assignment that is sometimes absent in university courses. Seeing our ideas gradually materialize made the project feel more realistic.

The final stage of the project involved presenting our proposal and answering questions from professionals, serving as City Council, who evaluated and deliberated on our proposals. This was one of my first experiences presenting a proposal in a more formal setting, and it gave me a sense of what these types of discussions might look like in practice. Overall, the project was both enjoyable and challenging, and it helped broaden my understanding of a future career in planning.

Rylan Graham is an Assistant Professor in the School of Planning and Sustainability at the University of Northern British Columbia the faculty representative for the PIBC Academic Liaison Committee.

Barnaby Mullen is a current student in the Bachelor of Planning program at the University of Northern British Columbia and the student representative for the PIBC Academic Liaison Committee.

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### References

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