The Fall 2013 Regional Planning Studio course, led by Dr. Darrel Ramsey-Musolf, examined Massachusetts municipalities in order to evaluate the Land-Use Element of their Master Plans. The class of fifteen students were randomized into teams of three, and each team chose two municipalities to explore. The teams created a planning consultancy firm, devised a mission statement, and negotiated agreements regarding work expectancy and dispute resolution. Each team read their municipalities Master Plan’s Introduction, Executive Summary, and Land-Use Element. Following this, each team conducted a site visit to the four municipalities to conduct a “gut” assessment of their examined municipalities.

The “gut” assessments asked: Is a town’s recent development (i.e., the last five to ten years) consistent with the land-use goals, objectives, and policies of the town's Master Plan? If a Master Plan was written within the last five years, the group explored whether the Master Plan addressed land-use deficiencies that were identified in written within the last five to ten years) consistent with the land-use goals, objectives, and policies of the town’s Master Plan. If a Master Plan was consistent with the land-use goals, objectives, and policies of the town’s Master Plan, the team decided to use their initial site visit to witness the respective community’s development patterns with an eye towards encouraging urbanism in their respective downtowns.

**Observations**

JCG Planning, LLC. (Greenfield and Orange): Although Greenfield and Orange identify similar goals in their master planning, the actual downtown environment of each community varies. Greenfield, which has a long history of manufacturing and industrial use, is now focusing on diversifying its economy and growing local business whereas Orange, a smaller community, is working on developing its commercial core to support a robust local economy. Each community has identified the downtown as a key area for revitalization, and both have developed comprehensive plans to guide their efforts. However, the plans for each town differ in terms of strategy and implementation. Greenfield’s plan focuses on promoting a diverse mix of businesses that revitalize its downtown and create new jobs. It also acknowledges the edges existing development challenges and the need to respond with better land use planning.

**Team Focus**

The focus for Greenfield and Orange was to examine how these communities are utilizing their downtowns to attract visitors, encourage local businesses, and improve the overall quality of life for residents. The teams found that both Greenfield and Orange are considering innovative strategies to revitalize their downtowns, including densification, mixed-use development, and improved pedestrian access. They also noted the importance of preserving historical and cultural assets, such as historic buildings and landmarks, which can help to attract visitors and create a sense of place.

**Land Use Goals**

The primary mission of West Springfield and Easthampton is to control the loss of greenfield area to low-density residential development. Each town already enjoys substantial growth from sprawl and they are accordingly disinclined to discourage its development in land use plans. West Springfield, specifically, saw the most affected of the two towns in its goal development due to its adjacency to development. Easthampton, which lies further to the west and is the first to host accountable dense development along existing infrastructure. In order to achieve the downtown and the plans underwriting this as a focus for anchoring the higher density, it is practically mandated that the downtown be able to support the density of development for which it aims.

**Observations**

One of the apparent signs of Pittsfield’s commitment to revitalize its downtown is investments in its “people climate.” These include newer educational institutions, the construction of new and improved community centers, and the expansion of public transportation options. Pittsfield’s downtown is also undergoing a transformation with the addition of new retail and dining options. Easthampton has been working on developing its downtown for several years, with a focus on attracting visitors and businesses. Both communities have prioritized the preservation and enhancement of their historic centers while also developing new mixed-use developments. Pittsfield has also been working on improving pedestrian and cycling infrastructure to make the downtown more accessible and inviting.

**Team Focus**

The focus for Pittsfield was to explore how these communities are utilizing their downtowns to attract visitors, encourage local businesses, and improve the overall quality of life for residents. The teams noted that both Pittsfield and Easthampton are considering innovative strategies to revitalize their downtowns, including densification, mixed-use development, and improved pedestrian access. They also noted the importance of preserving historical and cultural assets, such as historic buildings and landmarks, which can help to attract visitors and create a sense of place.

**Land Use Goals**

Holyoke wants to maximize the potential of its downtown area by encouraging higher-density development, improving pedestrian and cycling facilities, and attracting businesses that will contribute to its economic vitality. The city’s downtown is already home to several historic buildings and landmarks, and the teams were impressed with the city’s efforts to preserve and highlight these assets. The focus was on identifying the best location for future development, as well as assessing the feasibility and potential impact of various development scenarios.

**Team Focus**

The focus for Holyoke was to explore how the city is utilizing its downtown to attract visitors, encourage local businesses, and improve the overall quality of life for residents. The teams noted that Holyoke is considering innovative strategies to revitalize its downtown, including densification, mixed-use development, and improved pedestrian access. They also noted the importance of preserving historical and cultural assets, such as historic buildings and landmarks, which can help to attract visitors and create a sense of place.

**Land Use Goals**

Pittsfield has a long history of manufacturing and industrial use, which has contributed to the town’s economic vitality. The land use plan for Pittsfield seeks to establish better cohesion between existing development and new growth, with a focus on promoting walkability and creating a pedestrian-friendly downtown. The plan emphasizes the importance of preserving and enhancing the historic character of the downtown while also accommodating new development.

**Team Focus**

The focus for Pittsfield was to explore how the city is utilizing its downtown to attract visitors, encourage local businesses, and improve the overall quality of life for residents. The teams noted that Pittsfield is considering innovative strategies to revitalize its downtown, including densification, mixed-use development, and improved pedestrian access. They also noted the importance of preserving historical and cultural assets, such as historic buildings and landmarks, which can help to attract visitors and create a sense of place.