A Mission to Create Sustainable Living in Syracuse and Utica

On October 27th, students, faculty, and local residents gathered in the Science Center Auditorium for a panel titled, “Creating Sustainable Urban Communities in Syracuse and Utica,” presented by the Levitt Center Sustainability Program. The panel, mediated by Associate Professor of Government and Director of the Levitt Center Sustainability Program Peter Cannavo, featured five guest lecturers, each with relevant experience and knowledge in regards to the sustainable communities within the Rust Belt of New York State.

The first speaker, Cassandra Harris-Lockwood, currently serves as President of For the Good, a non-profit organization based in Utica that helps local residents stricken with poverty support themselves with various programs and resources. Throughout her portion of the lecture, Ms. Harris-Lockwood, a Kirkland College graduate, discussed her involvement with the community gardens in Utica and how these gardens, created by placing beds down in vacant lots throughout the city, attract people who cannot afford organic food or simply cannot make it to the nearest grocery store. Ms. Harris-Lockwood explained that the gardens are designed in a grid like pattern that is handicap accessible, making them accessible to everyone in the community. She also stressed the importance of local volunteers, such as Hamilton College students, to help harvest, weed and plant in the gardens. Some of the local produce harvested in the garden is also taken to the local soup kitchen, where people are extremely appreciative to have access to fresh vegetables. When asked how the garden is managed and owned, Ms. Harris-Lockwood replied, “Everybody owns everything, and nobody owns nothing,” exemplifying the importance of community and trust thriving in her gardens.

Next up was George Hobor, a Visiting Assistant Professor of Sociology professor at Colgate University. Professor Hobor took a much more analytical approach towards discussing the “devastated cities” of Syracuse and Utica. Professor Hobor completed a regional study of Rust Belt cities and industrialization from the 1970s to present, which was a three-part project. The first part, which he discussed in the most detail, involved analyzing why Syracuse and Utica have both become “devastated.” By calling these cities “devastated,” Professor Hobor explained that they have failed in relation to “stable” cities, which maintain the average level of production, population, and profit. While Utica is considered a small city and Syracuse is medium-sized, Professor Hobor discussed that both cities have positives as well as negatives. Syracuse, which has a larger population than Utica, is thriving more so than Utica because, as Professor Hobor explained, “stability means the ability to hop to a new industry.” Professor Hobor then went on to show how Utica has not made the hops to new industry and relies on older types of production, which keeps it in the “devastated” category. He did mention that Utica has a central growing population, which is important in the rise of the city’s industry.

Up next was Paula Horrigan, Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture at Cornell University. Professor Horrigan focused her portion of the discussion on her program titled “Rust to Green: Cultivating Resilience in New York’s Rust Belt.” Professor Horrigan acknowledged that the problems attacking the Rust Belt are complex, and that it is more than just economic instability. Therefore, she and her coworkers have planned a 3-5 year project that will aim to intervene in governance networks, help build
the environment, and help with social dynamics and metabolic flows. Professor Horrigan explained that these cities have the “promise of prosperity based on assets” and that by exploring railway systems, open land, the changing population, urban buildings, and vacant lots, she and her team can create a more sustainable environment for the inhabitants of Utica and Binghamton, the two cities that Rust to Green focuses on. She was pleased to discuss the successes of the program as of yet, which have already started transforming Utica. Rust to Green built the first rain garden/bioswell in Utica and has also done a lot of work with the Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School. They have also done some work at the roundabout in central Utica.

Brian Thomas, Acting Commissioner of Urban and Economic Development for the city of Utica, was next at the podium. A man of few words, Mr. Thomas explained that he and his committee of 50 members are currently developing a comprehensive plan for the city to enhance its sustainability through its assets. Mr. Thomas discussed that one of the committee’s central goals is to work on improving bus transit throughout the city by creating a bus terminal in downtown Utica. The projected start date for this project is within the next few months.

Finally, Andrew Maxwell, the Director of Planning and Sustainability for the city of Syracuse, showed the audience the various successes that Syracuse has recently experienced. Mr. Maxwell, who works under mayor of Syracuse Stephanie Miner, is working on the city’s comprehensive plan, which was established in 2005. Mr. Maxwell described all of the work that has to be done in regards to updating the plan, such as focusing on new housing and sustainability plans. He also detailed the recent success of the Onondaga Creek Walk, which is a biking and running path that stretches for over two miles in the city.