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# P L A N

# Learning to

## New program benefits Bay Area leaders, citizens, communities

By Susan Burnell

The weeknight class at Courtyard Marriott in Nassau Bay was supposed to end at 8:30. But the students are still there at 9 p.m., asking questions and wanting to learn more.

“That demonstrates a need for this type of education—there are very concrete stories behind the questions,” says Steven Mikulencak, who helped land the National Oceanic and Atmospheric

Administration grant that’s funding the first-ever Texas Coastal Citizen Planner (TCCP) educational program. Mikulencak is Program Coordinator for the Texas Coastal Watershed Program, Texas A&M University.

Class participants are elected officials, planning council members and leaders from Webster, League City and Galveston, and from as far away as Lake Jackson, Clute and Tomball. According to Mikulencak, the 20 students are earnest in their desire to learn more about city planning, land use, water projects, storm



Elected officials, planning council members and leaders from Webster, League City and Galveston, and from as far away as Lake Jackson, Clute and Tomball meet weekly in Nassau Bay to learn more about city planning, land use, water issues, quality of life and related issues. Front row (seated) from left: Geri Bentley, Zachary Meadows, Liz Ganstine, Brenda Colegrove, Khurram Rafi. Standing, from left: Steven Mikulencak, Suzanna Set, Dr. John Jacob, David Nicks, Barbara Tague, Linda Nicks, Deborah Fortune, Daniel Kelinske, Kevin Byal, Doug Peterson, Bill Mercer, Leo Waltz, Mathew Festa.

resilience, quality of life and related issues. Participants devote almost three hours a week for the course’s eight-week duration.

“Land use decisions made now and in the coming years will determine how resilient our critical facilities and communities will be for the next 30 years and beyond,” says Mikulencak. “This program brings in experts to talk about the issues elected and appointed officials face as they weigh important decisions for their communities.”

“Anytime you have better-informed people on city councils making decisions, it’s a good thing for citizens,” says class participant Geri Bentley, City of League City Council Member.

### How the Program Came to the Bay Area

The Citizen Planner program is based on a similar project developed at the University of Michigan. A handful of other states, including Virginia, have had programs in place since the mid-1950s. “What all of the citizen planner programs have in common is that they help local officials who have an ethic of service to their communities,” says Mikulencak, who holds the certified planner credential issued by the American Institute of Certified Planners.

“In our experience, we find that local officials enter public office in the spirit of service, but lack the knowledge of tools necessary to implement a community’s vision,” Mikulencak continues. “This program fills a gap in knowledge. It’s designed to help local officials steer projects towards creating more compelling neighborhoods and destinations, preserve local character and sustain the resources that make our area unique. This kind of capacity-building in local government is a prerequisite to improving our communities.”

The Texas Coastal Citizen Planner program is administered by Texas A&M University through Texas Sea Grant, Texas AgriLife and the Texas Coastal Watershed Program. Funding for this program is supported through NOAA Coastal Services Center’s Gulf of Mexico Research Competition and administered through the Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium. While the NOAA grant has funded only one 8-week program, Mikulencak hopes to be able to offer an online version of the course within the next year.

### Putting Ideas Into Action

Planning may involve looking 20 years ahead, or to a current proposal for a shopping center, condo development or a hotel on the beach, Mikulencak says. “Local officials may not have the staff to review every proposal, yet they have to vote up or down. Some decisions are shaped by local ordinances and design standards. Local ordinances are the DNA for a community’s building codes and development patterns. It may not seem all that exciting. But people forget they do have choices. Do they want their community to look like every other suburban community? Or do they →

**The 20 students are earnest in their desire to learn more about city planning, land use, water projects, storm resilience, quality of life and related issues.**

## Mohamed Khalil, MD

*Neurologist*

### Chronic Inflammatory Demyelinating Polyneuropathy (CIDP)

**About CIDP:** The Peripheral Nervous System is made of billions of nerves. They carry messages to and from the brain. They have a special covering called myelin which helps messages move through the nerves smoothly and quickly. In CIDP the peripheral nervous system is damaged and may lead to numbness or tingling, weakness in the arms or legs, tiredness, or pain. The cause of CIDP is your body’s own immune system, which attacks your body mistakenly. This is called an autoimmune disease.

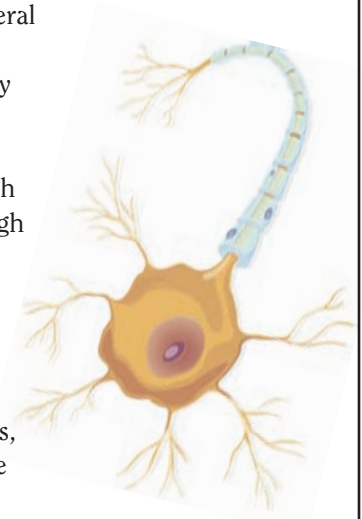
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want to keep the look of a traditional tree-lined main street, as League City has done?”

The TCCP program is designed to give local officials ways to implement a vision for the future, using best practices and thoughtful exploration of alternatives related to development, while also taking legal issues into consideration.

An October class session featured a discussion of local officials’ roles and responsibilities led by an attorney from the South Texas College of Law. “Learning about some court cases that have happened in the past with respect to zoning decisions has been interesting even to me,” says class participant Leo Waltz, City of Webster Planning and Zoning Commissioner. Waltz, who has been active on the commission for about 15 years, says the training will be especially useful as the City of Webster is now in the process of updating its Comprehensive Plan.

League City Council Member Bentley says she finds the interaction between class participants very helpful. She expects to put what she’s learning to use in capital improvement projects the council is asked to approve.



Steve Mikulencak uses a “weTable” interface and the mapping application is called CHARM (Community Health and Resources Management). The weTable name is a play on words. The system uses a Nintendo wiimote to work. The setup is intended for public workshops so that people can work collaboratively with maps and plans.

“The program helps us understand what goes into decisions about water projects, road projects, easements and projects with our neighboring communities,” says Bentley. “With a \$192 million budget, it’s important for the city council to be better informed so we can make better decisions for our community.”

More at <http://citizenplanner.tamu.edu/>



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