

The Cairo Studio: An Urban Design & Community Studio Intervention in the Upper Mississippi Delta

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The Regional Context:

Similar to New Orleans but at the opposite end of the Mississippi Delta, Cairo is contained within a floodwall and levee system created in the mid 19th century and modified through time to protect it from flooding by either or both the Mississippi and the Ohio rivers.

Cairo's early 1800s developmental roots are from the east - Philadelphia-Pittsburg-Cincinnati via the Ohio River, and from the

south - Memphis and New Orleans via the Mississippi River. Sections of Cairo and the surrounding small towns have vernacular and mansion-type architecture similar to both the Lower 9th Ward as well as the Garden District of New Orleans. Cairo's Delta Blues and the 50s jazz era music reflect New Orleans, Memphis, St Louis, and Chicago. Cairo was originally laid-out but unsuccessfully developed by Baltimore developers in 1818. After steamboats became successful modes of travel



Fig 01-Confluence from Air-Ned Trovillion

on the inland rivers, the Bank of London and east coast developers hired William Strickland, a prominent Philadelphia architect in 1835-36 to assess and make recommendations to develop the land and a city at the confluence of the Ohio with the Mississippi River. Strickland's handwritten report, housed in the Cairo Public Library "Special Collections",

recognized the potential of a deepwater harbor on the Ohio, recommended levees and major fill equal to the height of the levee system, and provided a plan for a large city with major parks, nodes, and landmarks with federal style buildings reminiscent of Washington, DC.¹

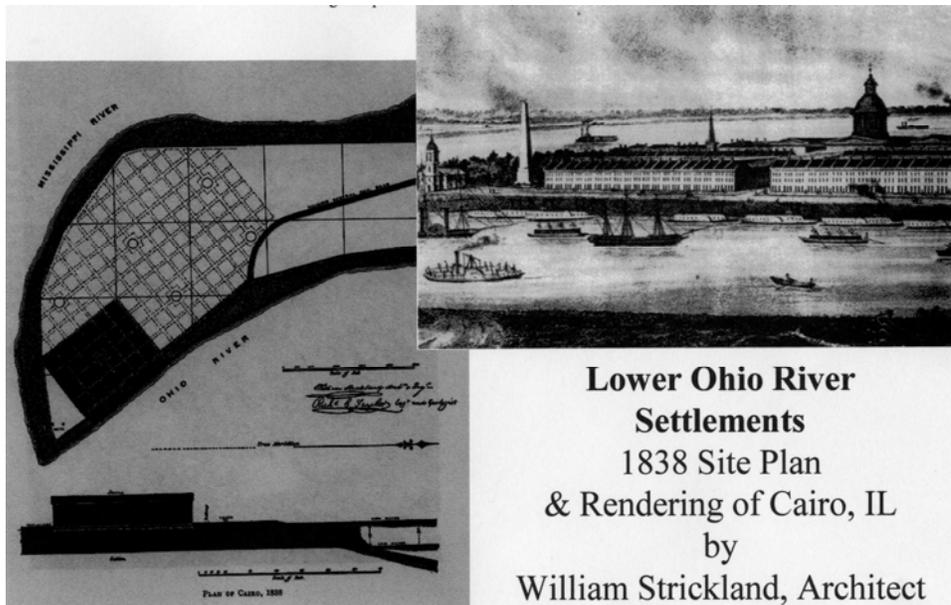


Fig02 – 1838 Cairo Drawings by William Strickland, Architect

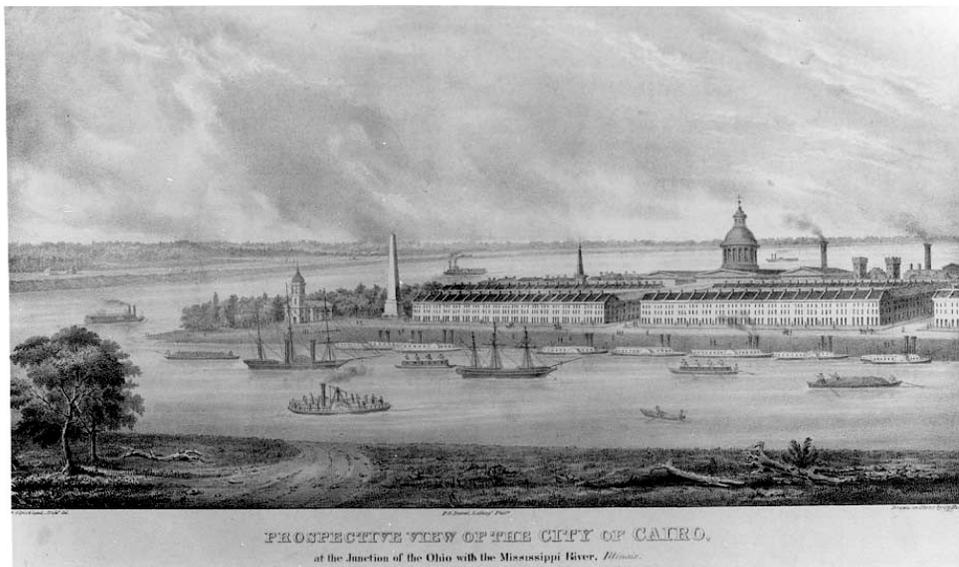


Fig 03 - Cairo by William Strickland (Library - Knox College, Illinois)

Although railroad and state politics derailed this proposal, the city eventually incorporated in the 1850s and hired a civil engineer to develop a new master plan to guide its growth in response to the enormous amount of Pittsburgh-New Orleans-St Louis steamboat traffic and the completion of the Illinois Central Railroad from Chicago to Cairo. A levee system designed to protect both the railroad and the city was completed and the town began to grow dramatically.² Cairo boomed

again in the 1860s as the result of the Civil War. Because of its strategic location, President Lincoln ordered Fort Defiance to be established at the confluence of the rivers resulting in Cairo becoming the early Civil War headquarters for General Ulysses S. Grant. Nearby Mound City on the Ohio became the headquarters for admirals Porter and Foote and the gunboats of the U. S. "Brownwater" Navy.³

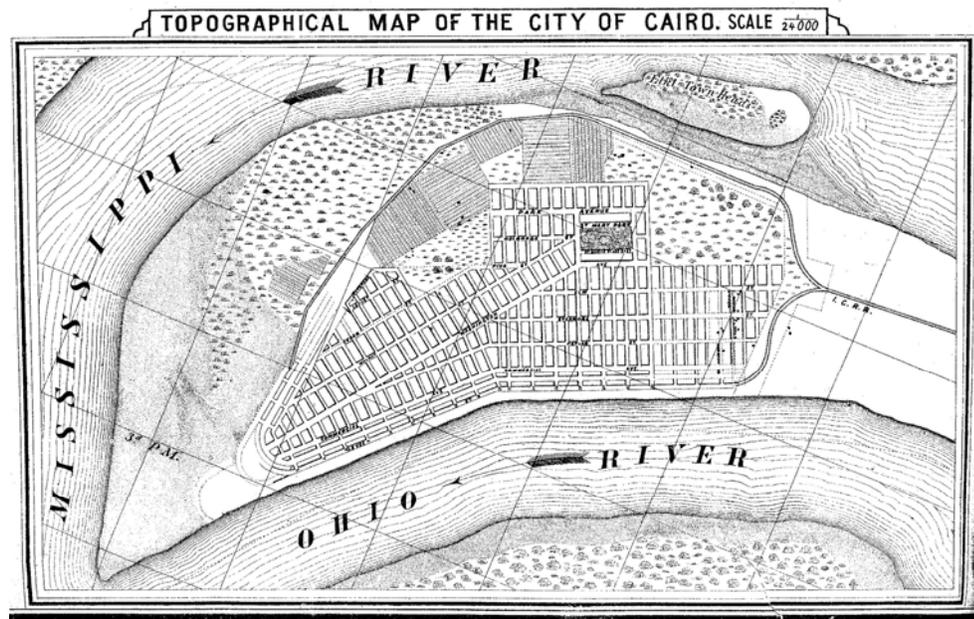


Fig 04 – 1872 Plan – City of Cairo (Cairo Public Library – Special Collections)

Cairo continued to grow and prosper, with ups and downs matching the economic climate of the United States, into the middle 20th century. At one time during its history, five major railroads terminated at Cairo, three bus lines stopped in Cairo, and there were three scheduled airline stops a day.⁴ Cairo was the edge of both the north and the south racially and economically and for the Blacks traveling on the train or buses, Cairo was symbolic as it was the place where the train stopped so that Blacks could either sit together with whites or had to move to sit separately with other Blacks depending on their destination – north or south.⁵ The curtains on the buses separating Blacks and Whites were pulled open or closed at Cairo depending on the destination of the bus.⁶ Because of serious racial issues and a unique Civil Rights boycott and struggle, Cairo lost most of its businesses in the late 60s and

early 70s, and by 2005, over 80% of its 1950s population had moved away.⁷ The result is a population that is mostly Black and low income, a dysfunctional city political system, high taxes necessary to maintain the utility infrastructure by fewer and fewer residents, high utility bills, and the manipulation of the land along the river's edge by large industrial and corporate interests. The current sense of despair by even the most optimistic of the remaining community leaders has crippled the city in many ways. The previous Mayor suggested that the "last person out should turn out the lights".⁸ The current Mayor is unable to muster a quorum at most city meetings to conduct city business.⁹ The school system is considered one of the weakest in the state and no longer even fields a high school football team, which in years past, had "All-America" athletes and won state championships.

Not everyone is so pessimistic however. At least three real estate developers from elsewhere in the region, have been buying property available at tax sales, estimated to consist of almost two-thirds of the land and structures within the city. River industry and river related rail-to-barge facilities owned by major grain related industries (ADM and Cargill) have a strong presence along the Ohio

from Cairo to Mound City. Barge handling groups that service the river towing industry also have a strong presence in Cairo. The City of Cairo's largest income base is from the publicly held electric and natural gas utility which it sold to a private group several years ago, still a potentially litigious and hot political issue for many residents.



Fig 05 – Cairo Downtown from the Air (photo by author)

At this time there are at least four significant proposals either under construction or in the serious development pipeline that can make a tremendous impact on the future of the City of Cairo. These include:

1. Interstate 66 from the east coast to and through Oklahoma City and on to the west coast is by Federal legislation required to cross the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers through southernmost Illinois near Cairo. Because Cairo does not appear to be concerned with the economic development potential of I-66, several other regional cities are developing strong lobbies to attract this interstate highway and bridge system to other locations on either the Ohio 48 miles upriver near Metropolis or on the Mississippi over 10 miles south of Cairo.¹⁰ Either of these choices would
- put Cairo miles away from major paths of travel - out-of-sight and out-of-mind.
2. The Army Corps of Engineers is constructing a \$1.2 Billion lock and dam just upriver from Cairo that will make the Crescent of the Ohio River between Cairo and Paducah, KY an even more significant river-rail-truck barge traffic node.¹¹
3. A "National Park at the Confluence" immediately south of Cairo is in its first phase of funding and is expected to be a formidable tourist destination in addition to the already existing significant historic sites in and near Cairo.¹²
4. A major energy related industrial complex requiring access to rail, truck, and both rivers is in the planning and

property acquisition stages immediately north of Cairo which is expected to employ 3,000-4,000 workers both during and after construction.¹³

Because of Cairo's contribution to the history of our developing nation and the historic structures remaining that reflect this history, its strategic location geographically at the cross-roads and center of the inland river system, the mid-point of the primary rail system between Canada and the gulf, and centered within the mid-west interstate highway system, there of those of us in the region that are confident that this place can again be a significant, thriving, and vibrant city. The City of Cairo still has, albeit not in good condition, an infrastructure of streets, utilities, vacant industrial property, downtown vacant buildings and empty lots, school buildings, empty churches, park system, etc. to easily support an additional 12,000-15,000 people. The last significant mapping and analysis of land use, utility infrastructure, property ownership, quality of remaining structures, and recommendations for future development by planning professionals was accomplished over twenty years ago. Design and planning professionals in the region are rarely involved with projects in Cairo unless the project and construction budgets and design fees are more than adequate and supported by substantial government funding, often obtained because they have excellent political connections.¹⁴ The regional planning agencies' staff primarily write and administer grants and are typically not GIS specialists, nor do they include formally educated, trained, and experienced regional and city planners.

The University Context:

SIU-Carbondale has a strong sense of responsibility to not only serve the southern Illinois region's higher education and research needs, but to also provide "service to the region" in the form of assisting communities and entrepreneurs enhance their economic development opportunities (Office of Economic and Regional Development – Small Business Incubator), Family Practice Centers (School of Medicine), legal services to special populations (School of Law), dental services (College of Applied Sciences and Arts), and many other

research and service activities by other disciplines.

The SIUC School of Architecture has been responding to regional requests for design and planning assistance for many years, and Cairo has been one of the significant sites for both research and the development of design and planning ideas. Faculty and students with the School of Architecture provided the design services for the development of the plan for the National Park at the Confluence mentioned earlier. This author was co-director of a recent grant from the Library of Congress to research and develop projects related to Lewis and Clark's 1803 activities in southernmost Illinois. Exhibits were created at the U.S. Custom House Museum and Library in Cairo and a significant sculpture was placed at the Confluence of the Rivers commemorating their mapping and celestial navigation activities at that place.

The senior level Urban Planning and Community design studio has for several years used actual contemporary urban planning projects in significant North American and European cities as field study sites and projects as urban planning learning experiences. Prior to the Katrina Hurricane event that destroyed much of New Orleans, the faculty assigned to this studio developed relationships with staff at the New Orleans City Planning Commission to prepare for the Fall 2005 studio. The intended project was to work with the "Riverfront Vision 2005" proposal as our area of study, with our primary focus on the Lower Garden District, the Warehouse and CDB, and the French Quarter areas' relationship with the riverfront and related development proposals. Because of the hurricane, we were unable to visit New Orleans as planned, but we sent digital and hard copies of our student projects to our NOLA contacts. We continued to maintain communications with NOLA planning staff that remained after the hurricane and with faculty and staff at Tulane University in order to develop our current Fall 2006 studio project to again focus on New Orleans as a service-learning experience. At their recommendations, we decided to focus our attention and efforts to assist with the development of Master Plan concepts and proposals with the Lower 9th Ward community, an area particular hard hit by the hurricane.

It is clear from this experience (Other faculty may be describing the Lower 9th project in much greater detail in this session) that the more dialogue and opportunities for personal interaction and relationships there are between the students and the constituency, the better the understanding and appreciation for the needs and desires of the community results and the greater the depth of learning. Our students prepared the groundwork for and conducted on-site observations though extensive neighborhood walks and documented detailed in-depth existing condition surveys. They conducted intensive research about available existing drawings and databases, attended community meetings, and accomplished a significant amount professional and personal digital photography and video. These activities resulted results in countless opportunities for personal interviews and empathic introspection that can not occur in-studio and by viewing news broadcasts, films and videos, and documentaries similar to the HBO Spike Lee Katrina broadcast.

Proposal

Because the author of this paper has been engaged in research and service projects in southernmost Illinois for many years, both as an architectural practitioner and as an educator, and is particularly knowledgeable and interested in community and regional studies and planning, this proposal is to have one of the three ARC451 Urban Studies and Community sections, through the sponsorship of both the established regional planning commission and the Delta Regional Commission's designated county agency, begin a relationship with the City of Cairo. It is proposed that the relationship and planning research and activities would continue for two-three years, non-stop through consecutive semesters and summer terms, until a Master Plan acceptable to the community at-large and with a viable re-development and community development process is well underway. We would begin by building on a continuing relationship with the *Southern 5 Planning Commission* which represents the lower five counties and *SIDEZ – Southern Illinois Development Enterprise Zone - Alexander County Sub-Zone* office. These two agencies could help facilitate and assist in providing basic funds for the SIU-Carbondale School of Architecture to become the un-official urban

and master planning consultant to the City of Cairo until such time that the City has the necessary funds to establish its own Planning Commission and/or hire a professional consultant on a continuing basis.

Much of the ground-work for this has been accomplished. For the past six summers I have conducted an interdisciplinary and inter-generational **Preservation Summer** class consisting of students from Architecture, Interior Design, History, Geography, and other disciplines and an equal number of typically older *Community Listeners* from the southernmost Illinois region.¹⁵ We have conducted on-site field research on a variety of topics related to the development and architectural history along the lower Ohio River portion of southernmost Illinois. A number of these research projects were focused on Cairo in some way, including developing a city map and "Sanborn Map" building outline database and the beginnings of a property ownership and existing building type and quality database. Students from the classes have developed "independent studies" projects that have focused on downtown area revitalization proposals and Master Planning studies and proposals and the beginnings of a digital 3-D "Sketch-Up" model for at least a portion of the city. One section of the Fall 2001 *Urban Design and Community* studio class developed a Master Planning model and series of specific proposals for the City of Cairo which were presented to the City Council for consideration and given to the City for display purposes. An election, a change in mayor and other administrative staff, and the reality that students and faculty moving on to other semester courses and projects resulted in the proposals presented to City Council dropping out of sight and out of mind.

The current proposal will remedy the "lack of continuity" problem by having the faculty and staff continues the project in a significant way from one semester to the next, through the summer term, and into the fall formal *Urban Studies and Community* course of each year for at least three years. This will be accomplished by this faculty, assisted by one or two undergraduate assistants, to begin developing the community partnering relationships in the Spring Semester 2007. We will meet with the various agencies, the Cairo Mayor and City Council, the Cairo Rotary Club

(the most significant remaining business oriented community service organization remaining in Cairo), plus the USDA *Office of Rural Development* (a potential funding source) to develop the community-service and the educational goals and scope of the project. We would develop the existing maps, aerial photograph, GIS information, and other resources database and determine a priority list of the project needs. We would also establish a small Cairo office for community and class meetings and to have a place to store and display graphic materials related to the planning process. We would attend City Council and Rotary Club meetings on a regular basis, updating both regarding our activities and accomplishments each month, and getting their feedback and support for the project activities. We would determine the kinds of activities and number of students and community listeners needed during the 8-week *Preservation Summer* class needed to prepare for the Fall 2007 *Urban Studies and Community* class.

The *Preservation Summer 2007* class would begin with a history of and tours of Cairo and the lower Ohio River region to develop the core information needed to begin to understand the Cairo Planning project. Students would continue the development and preparation of digital base maps using research materials available at the Cairo Public Library *Special Collections* and through the Alexander County Clerk's office. In addition, the students would review and prepare appropriate GIS mapping database materials available through the Southern 5 Planning Commission. This group of students would also prepare additional research information regarding those North American and European cities that are directly related historically to Cairo's development . . . ie: London, Paris, Montreal, Toronto, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Louisville, St Louis, Memphis, New Orleans, and Chicago.

The Fall 2007 *Urban Studies and Community Class* would also begin with a history of and tours of Cairo and the lower Ohio River region to develop the core information needed to begin to understand the Cairo Planning project. Reading materials and lectures related to the physical and political history of Cairo would be assigned and provided. The students would be introduced to each of the four significant

proposals mentioned above, meet parties involved in each, and get up-dates on their development progress. The students (entire class) would attend the first regular *Southern 5 Planning Commission* meeting, Cairo City Council meeting, and the *Cairo Rotary Club* meeting of the fall semester. The purpose is to introduce all students to the clients and the clients to the students. Attendance at future regular meetings would be by smaller groups of students on a rotating basis to be sure all students maintain a personal contact to the community throughout the semester. It is hoped that a community group representing all of the above mentioned groups would be selected to become the "community planning" group authorized by the City Council to advise both the faculty and students and their own respective groups. It is also hoped that this "community planning" group would encourage more involvement by their respective constituencies. We would offer and provide materials for the local newspaper and presentation materials at public meetings to facilitate this process.

Once everyone has been introduced and there is public publicity about the project in the local newspaper, using organization and data collecting techniques used successfully in our New Orleans Lower 9th project, students would form teams to identify, walk, photograph, and collect data about the major neighborhoods and districts of the entire city to verify the accuracy and add missing information to the map database provided for use by the class. This information would be analyzed and organized into a set of graphic maps, photo montages, "Excel" type database files, and scale model illustrating the existing landuse, pathways, nodes, landmarks, edges, and other descriptors of the conditions existing as of Fall 2007. This information would then be presented to the City Council and the "community planning" group to keep them informed and to obtain their response and suggestions.

After the basic information about the region has been reviewed and absorbed, the students, and possibly several members of the Cairo community, would then travel to and tour one or more of the above referenced cities to gain knowledge and insights regarding urban planning. After returning and sharing significant information obtained with the

“community planning” group and others, we would organize a series of public meetings to encourage residents in participating in the development of an overall set of goals, objectives, and major features desired by the Cairo community in a Master Plan. Using this information, the class would analyze the existing conditions database, review and update the status of the four major outside influences mentioned above, plus any others that develop during the preceding months, prepare a base study model for use with this and all future analysis and proposal presentations, and prepare a Preliminary Master Plan set of documents for presentation and review by the “community planning” group (and the City Council if desired). It is expected that this process would require the entire Fall 2007 semester with a public presentation to be held at the end of the semester.

During spring semester 2008, this faculty, assisted by one or more undergraduate assistant student(s), would organize all the research and work products from the Fall semester and display and/or store in the Cairo office facility. The faculty and students would attend City Council meetings and continue meeting with the “community planning” group to be sure there are no “lulls” or serious gaps in the planning process and communications to the community. The faculty and students would also prepare for additional research and data analysis needed during the Preservation Summer 2008 class students who would also continue the communications and maintain necessary activities to continue the process and to prepare materials for the next major effort by the Fall 2008 Urban Studies and Community class. Each recurring stage of the process is expected to be more sophisticated and in greater depth and clarity than the previous stage until such time as the “planning group” recommend to and the City Council adopt a plan for implementation. . . . and just as important, that there is the necessary community understanding and support for its implementation.

Justification - Conclusion

The City of Cairo has a consulting City Engineer to deal with infrastructure issues such as water, sewer, streets, and periodic public projects such as the design and installation of a new “city boat ramp”, but it does not have

the mandate and funds for a comprehensive city planning effort to develop a sophisticated and well considered Master Plan to guide future developments. If left without the kind of analysis and assistance proposed, the City of Cairo will simply react to regional developments as they happen, unprepared and disorganized. The absentee landlords and property owners with substantial property will simply develop and/or sell their property without regard for the overall best long-term interests for the City of Cairo . . . the most recent example being that the City responded to a request by a outside “truck-rail to barge trans-loading facility” developer by offering the former city business district center of town next to the river and/or the original property on which the Civil War Fort Defiance was located, both being the only land and waterfront property in the city which the City by default has any control, to the developer. It is only because of the economic plight of the City of Cairo at this time that this extraordinary advocacy experience and learning opportunity is available to the SIU-Carbondale School of Architecture. Cairo is in a “crisis mode” and similar to New Orleans, had there not been a hurricane and the loss of professional staff, we would not have had that opportunity.

Endnotes

¹ John M. Lansden, A History of the City of Cairo, Illinois, copyrite 1910, by John Lansden, Chicago, R.R. Donnelley, (reprint 1976, Carbondale, IL, Southern Illinois University Press), 28

² Ibid

³ John A. Beadles, A History of Southernmost Illinois, De Peres, MO, (The Gateway Press, 1990), 35-37 and Bigham, 133

⁴ Booklet, “Our Town Will Grow”, 1952, Cairo Chamber of Commerce, Cairo Association of Commerce, 5 & 10 (SIU-C Special Collections, Morris Library)

⁵ Preston Ewing, Cairo, IL, personal interviews by author, Oct-Nov 2001

⁶ ibid

⁷ Preston Ewing, Jr. and Jan Peterson Roddy, Let My People Go, 1996, Carbondale, IL, Southern Illinois University Press

⁸ Wilson, James, public discussion comment as remembered by the author, 2004

⁹ Cairo Evening Citizen newspaper various recent accounts

¹⁰ East-West Transamerica Corridor, US Department of Transportation – Federal Highway Administration website. Accessed 21 November 2001. Available from <http://fhwa.dot.gov/hep/10/nhs/hipricorridors/index.htm>

¹¹ Army Corp of Engineers Louisville District, Olmsted Locks and Dam Homepage, Accessed Aug-Nov 2001. Available from http://www.lrl.usace.army.mil.olmsted_specproj/Olmsted.htm

¹² Lenzi, Raymond, Davis, Bruce, Swenson, Robert, Confluence of Freedom National Park – Final Master Plan Proposal, OERD-Office of Economic and Regional Development, Southern Illinois University – Carbondale, July 2004 (Author - design consultant)

¹³ Private conversation between author and significant regional informant

¹⁴ Author's personal professional experience in Cairo and the region

¹⁵ The "Community Listener" non-credit program is administered by the SIUC Office of Continuing Education and is available for a nominal fee subject to the approval of the faculty. I typically recruit encourage as many *Community Listeners* as possible to be actively involved along side our for-credit students.