

LAWRENCE HARMON

Urban mechanics

An elite group of students is designing ways to make the gears of city government operate more smoothly

By Lawrence Harmon, Globe Columnist | August 22, 2010

THE THINK tank at Boston City Hall is percolating with ideas courtesy of elite graduate and law students normally found in summer internships at white-shoe law firms and downtown consulting firms. Using research skills honed at the nation's top colleges, 13 interns just completed a 10-week stint analyzing and designing solutions for municipal brainteasers.

Katie Ridgway, a Princeton University graduate student, has been reconnoitering the city and delving into the zoning code to determine if urban farming has a place in Boston's future. The concept of commercial farming in former industrial districts has taken hold in Detroit and other cities with big swaths of vacant land. But even in land-hungry Boston, the prospect of providing new jobs and locally-grown food for urban residents is too tempting to ignore. Ridgway, 26, has identified about 40 parcels that could be used for commercial farming. They range from lots no smaller than one-half acre in thinly-settled sections of Mattapan to portions of the Marine Industrial Park along the waterfront where the Menino administration is trying to generate interest in aquaculture.

"The city doesn't address agriculture in the zoning code," said Ridgway, who recently briefed Mayor Menino on ways to update the code to allow farming in industrial zones. She also surveyed the rooftops of city-owned properties suitable for intensive gardening. It's an ambitious project in a city where residents can grow old trying to navigate the approval process for raising a few chickens in their backyards.

The fellows set up shop in City Hall's Boston Urban Mechanics Program, where they design ways to make the gears of city government operate more smoothly. The program is in its third summer of operation. And it's a good deal for taxpayers. The nonprofit Rappaport Foundation covers the salaries of most of the interns. The few city-funded positions pay just \$4,000 for the summer. The reward for students comes in experience and proximity to the levers of municipal power.

Some of the summer interns arrive with a knowledge of bureaucracies in addition to deluxe degrees. Michelle Wu, 25, opened a tea cafe in Chicago prior to entering Harvard Law School. In Boston, Wu adopted the role of a "mystery shopper" seeking to open a restaurant. She endured a three-day quest for the elusive "common victualler license," including stops at the city's inspectional services, health, building, licensing, and fire departments, as well as a mandatory side trip to the State House library to secure codes on food handling.

Wu used the experience to mock up a website for the Menino administration that would allow entrepreneurs to make the journey online. Then she updated the basic application for the common victualler license that previously read as if written for Colonial cooks dishing cornmeal mush and molasses in local inns.

Other interns concentrated on the neediest sections of the city where Menino is trying to integrate social services and public education. Jeremy Levine, a PhD student in sociology at Harvard, assessed the distribution of social and recreational services for young people in the city's "Circle of Promise," including Roxbury and other neighborhoods dealing with high crime and low student achievement rates.

Levine, 24, identified 140 public and private social service agencies serving youths within the circle. But he found only six agencies serving children younger than kindergarten age, and only about 20 offering language supports despite a large population of non-English speakers. Anti-violence and leadership development programs proliferated. Now the Menino administration needs to deal quickly with the gaps and redundancies if it is to live up to its promise to improve the quality of life for more than 5,000 children within the circle.

For a self-described "dese, dose, dem guy," Menino has spent a lot of effort bringing scholars to City Hall. It has already paid off in projects like "Citizens Connect," an iPhone application that allows residents to file complaints directly with city work crews by snapping photos of graffiti, potholes, and broken traffic signals.

But time is running down on the fifth-term mayor's legacy. And he knows it.

"I want finished projects," said Menino.

Some of those projects could turn out to be topflight students who opt for careers in public service instead of corporate law or financial services.

Lawrence Harmon can be reached at harmon@globe.com. ■