



2024

City of Granite Falls Intern

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COLLEGE OF THE ENVIRONMENT



Internship Title: City of Granite Falls - Community Development Intern

Organization Worked For: City of Granite Falls

Student Name: Jax Thaxton

Internship Dates: June 2023 - March 2024

Faculty Advisor Name: Nicholas Zaferatos

Department: UEPP

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STUDENT SIGNATURE _____

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jax Thaxton", written over a horizontal line.

DATE: 06/12/24 _____

City of Granite Falls – Community Development Internship June 2023 – March 2024

Introduction

Upon finding the posting for an internship position with Granite Falls, I immediately noticed a strong correlation between the job expectations and my current coursework at the time. One of the listed objectives was to help draft a 2024 Comprehensive Plan update – something I had just gained my first hands-on experience with in Land Use Regulations & Technical Writing, where student teams were tasked with making Comprehensive Plan recommendations for cities and towns in Skagit County. The town I worked with, La Conner, had noticeable parallels with Granite Falls such as the small size and proximity to tribal reservations. Of course, this piqued both my interest and excitement as Granite Falls also had listed strengthening tribal ties as one of their objectives. With the expected workload being something I had freshly learned and practiced, I was set on making this internship a reality to put my newfound skills to work and see how they operate in a real city government setting. Not only that, but I also hoped to gain insight on the inner workings of a city government; how funding and grants work, how codes are developed, how and where GIS is implemented, and a deeper understanding of how tribal relations are codified and/or executed in a real-world setting.

Because this position seemed like too perfect of a fit to pass up, upon finding out that they had already selected another student for a paid position, I pushed for consideration as an unpaid intern. The listing stated there would possibly be room for a second but only the budget for one, so I weighed my options and decided that, again, I can't pass up the opportunity to get the niche experience that my studies were focusing on at the time. Through doing this, I felt as though I was able to make a lasting connection with not only my supervisor, but with a peer. I believe my insistence was interpreted as determination and helped the city feel confident in bringing me on board, creating a good impression to kickstart our working relationship. I also got to spend a decent amount of time working with a fellow student in the UPSD major.

Objectives

Tribal Coordination

The first learning objective outlined in my internship agreement was to gain an understanding of a city government's relationship with tribal entities, and how they work together to honor environmental duties such as preserving hunting and fishing rights. I started with somewhat of a homework assignment: reading *Washington Tribes and the Growth Management Act*, and Puget Sound Regional Council's (PSRC) *Vision 2050*. I then drew connections between recommended sustainability practices from the PSRC report and compared and contrasted them with native environmental stewardship practices, followed by synthesizing this all into a memo for my

supervisor. This catalyzed him to recommend I begin researching all the legislature that goes into governing relationships with tribes and start reaching out to local Snohomish County tribes to see what kind of efforts have been made and what needs to be done moving forward.

I was tasked with getting in touch with 3 tribes: Tulalip, Sauk-Suiattle, and Stillaguamish.

Unfortunately, both Sauk-Suiattle and Tulalip are far-removed enough from Granite Falls and have had enough lackluster experiences with other cities in the county that they did not express interest. However I was able to contact the Stillaguamish tribe and found they were happy to allow Granite Falls to incorporate elements of their Wetland Programs plan into the city's new proposed Wetlands sections of the Comprehensive Plan. After finally having one productive tribal interaction under my belt, I compiled all my legislative research, survey research on how tribes felt of the current state of their government-to-government interactions, and my recommendations for improving relationships and incorporating some of their environmental stewardship methods into our own plans. This would go into a memo for both the Granite Falls City Council and Planning Commission.

I was able to round out my experience on tribal research and coordination by presenting my data to both the council and commission during their respective meetings in August of 2023.

Plan Drafting

The second objective outlined in my agreement was to get hands-on experience with developing official plans. This started with identifying with my supervisor what plan elements needed to be fleshed out. We began with the Natural Features element, where I would draft a Streams subsection, a Sustainability subsection, and new climate-conscious goals for the entire element, as well as reworking the language of the entire plan to emphasize sustainable growth practices.

Examples of new goals I recommended:

NF-1.5 - Promote methods of energy recovery and the utilization of industrial by-products.

NF-1.6 – Encourage the use of infrastructure that improves water runoff quality, such as green roofs and rain gardens.

In July of 2023, the WA Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) released an updated wetlands rating system, which prompted my supervisor to get in contact with a Habitat Biologist from WDFW to assist us and give feedback on the revisions mentioned above. While that was a great resource, I appreciated the opportunity even more when we all collaborated to discuss how to utilize the Stillaguamish Wetland Program Plan to create our own Wetland subsection and update the City's Critical Area Ordinance to meet the same standards. Overall, I ended up getting more than just hands-on experience with plan drafting, I also got to experience collaborating with agencies that are well-versed in the regulations and strategies that go into informing good city government plans.

Housing

Lastly, in my learning agreement I also hoped to find ways to mitigate urban sprawl and strike a balance between finding housing opportunities and preserving ecosystems. This manifested as researching ways to kickstart a new pre-approved additional dwelling unit plans program. This primarily included compiling and researching a list of precedent cities who have adopted similar programs such as Renton, Seattle, Olympia, Leavenworth, and Port Angeles. This would then become a series of memos describing the processes of the cities implemented the programs, what kind of firms they contracted for creating the plans, and how to codify them. Though we have not solidified a way to establish a program thus far, we were able to narrow down our options of potential architectural partners, as well as where we would codify its implementation in the Housing element of the Comprehensive Plan as well as the municipal code. According to my supervisor, the advancement of this program is likely a next step for the city and any potential future interns.

Conclusion

Overall, I am beyond grateful for every piece of experience I gained from this internship – each one fitting perfectly into the jigsaw puzzle that is a planner’s education. I have to express thanks and give the necessary credit to my supervisor, Eric Jensen, who made the experience rewarding, challenging, and engaging. I have few regrets, if any, regarding this experience. However, it most certainly has made me reconsider what I want out of a career. I do wish there were more forms of creative expression when working in city government – much of the work I’ve done was summarizing research, writing codes and plans, and expanding my knowledge base, none of which are negative things. But it does leave me to wonder about what careers in planning would allow me to engage in more design-oriented work. Perhaps the answer is a private firm or obtaining a GIS certificate... whatever it may be, I can still confidently say that working with city government over a 9-month period has been invaluable for contextualizing my education with hands-on work and collaborating with real tribes and state agencies. Not only am I walking away from this experience with newfound expertise, but also a connection and a great reference for future employers with Eric.

I would recommend this position to any student in the planning field who wants to challenge themselves with tasks that have real implications on a real city. I especially think that this position was a great way to engage with the material I learned in several UPSD classes such as Land Use Regulations & Technical Writing (UEPP374), Native American Planning & Natural Resource Management (UEPP463), and Community Development & Participatory Method (UEPP475).