St. Martinville Mayor Thomas Nelson awarded a class of University of Louisiana at Lafayette architecture graduate students and its professor keys to the city on April 3.

Nelson reached out to students enrolled in an urban design course to design a potential master plan to develop property along Bayou Teche called Talley, which is some of the only publicly accessible land located on Bayou Teche and also where St. Martinville's festival grounds are.

Nelson said it had been a long-time dream for the community to develop the property and the class gave them an interesting perspective to work with. He said he gave Ashlie Latiolais and her students city keys as a way to show his and the community's appreciation for the class's hard work and vision.

“Talley is a three-acre property that was once a heavy industrial site where concrete and construction materials were produced—even before that, it was a train depot—and in its post-industrial state, his class wanted to bring some life back to the site. It was a big thing for us to be a part of the community that way and to really get to know the people of St. Martinville and see what this means to them,” said Welcher. “I think for a lot of us it was cool to see that this thing that we’re studying can impact people, and it can impact communities.”

Welcher said there were three groups of students, and each group designed master plans and presented them to the city and Main Street community.

Assistant professor Latiolais, AIA, said the city wants to bring one or two students from each group and have them transplant the three proposals into a comprehensive plan to be submitted to the state and the city for possible funding in the summer.

“The overall experience was awesome to work with the city of St. Martinville,” said Latiolais. “They’re extremely positive and excited about the project. They were so thankful for the work the students did, and that was really nice to experience.”

Welcher, who was in Group A, said his group researched the city’s demographics to get a better idea of their economic situation. The group found that since the last census, St. Martinville’s population had decreased from 8,000 or so to below 6,000.

“We started to take in a lot of components and concern ourselves with the festival grounds because it has a huge economic impact on the city, idyllic,” said Welcher. “As although it may only happen three or four times a year,” said Reeves. “Those three or four times of the year bring in a great main street. The middle ground between leaves a little bit to be desired. There needs to be some kind of economic revival there.”

The group proposed transplanting some of the economic functions from the downtown area and incorporating residential commodities, too, like mixed-use developments with commercial on the bottom floor and people living above or behind, a cultural center and a stage with a lot of open space.

Welcher said the group still wanted to accommodate all of the festivals that St. Martinville has and to frame the area’s access to Bayou Teche, something that makes the park unique.

“We wanted to give not just St. Martinville but surrounding cities access to the Teche here,” added the work the students did, and that was really nice to experience.”

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"There's also the fact that St. Martinville has a very historic position within the state; it's one of the oldest cities and one of the places the Acadians came to first, which is why the St. Martin de Tours Church is highly idolized," continued Reeves. "We wanted to be able to make connections to those types of concepts."

The group discovered the old railroad depot ran right through the site, and the historic sugarmill bridge that had been donated to the city was also a swing bridge for railroad cars. So the group proposed barging it down as a central connecting point where the old railroad ran. By utilizing that with different programs like fresh markets, the group envisioned activities that could engage the community.

Architecture graduate student Jesus Navarro, '25, said Group C mainly focused on the park area. They wanted to bring outdoor activity to the site because most areas next to rivers in Louisiana are privately owned, so they wanted to take advantage of that. Because it's also the festival area, they wanted to enhance it with an amphitheater where people can sit, run, fly kites and be next to the river.

"It was really exciting because usually with clients they have really restricted guidelines and they usually know exactly what they want and so they're closed-minded in a way to what they want," said Navarro. "With St. Martinville, they were really open to any suggestions.

"It was really great because we felt like we were reaching out to the community," Navarro continued. "As architects, we want to make people feel good and satisfied with what we do. It was definitely unique, and the key was the icing on the cake."