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Compiled by Nancy M. Bragg
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n 1995, Jennings A. Jones dreamed of a program that would assist the citizens of middle Tennessee to create a better future through urban and regional planning. He approached former MTSU President James E. Walker, and his dreams began to take form.

Jennings and Rebecca Jones provided $625,000 and with matching funds from the state of Tennessee, the Jennings and Rebecca Jones Chair of Excellence in Urban and Regional Planning at MTSU was established in 1997. Earl S. Swensson, FAIA, accomplished architect and planner, is the inaugural chairholder.

The mission of the chair is to produce and disseminate information relevant to the planning needs of the midstate region. The events hosted by the chair encourage dialogue on important planning issues among area policymakers, opinion leaders, and the broader community of interest.

The objectives of the chair are to (1) promote applied research and service focused on urban and regional planning; (2) provide a forum for the discussion of urban and regional issues and for the development of solutions to promote effective economic development; (3) act as a resource to the regional community of interest in identifying, analyzing, and solving problems; (4) encourage interactions of faculty and students with practitioners in a broad range of industries and institutions influenced and expected to be affected by growth; and (5) support the on-campus development of curriculum materials and faculty more conversant with the issues of the region.

The chair, primarily focused on public service, hosted the following events in 2002-03:

- “Planners and Preservationists: Speaking the Same Language” Aug. 20, 2002—The chair, in partnership with Tara Mielnik (Certified Local Government Coordinator for the Tennessee Historical Society) and MTSU’s Center for Historic Preservation, invited individuals to attend this seminar with overview by Swensson and facilitated by Nancy Jane Baker.

  Both preservationists and planners seek to improve the quality of life in a community. This common goal creates the need for better communication between the two groups. This session was an open forum for discussion on the goals of each group, the services provided by each group, and any special needs required to enhance the communication between the groups. Invited were asked to discuss the services they provide and special needs of their group and to share any ideas for further pursuit of the goal of our initial meeting.

- “Planners and Preservationists: Speaking the Same Language” follow-up meetings were held Sept. 23 and Oct. 28, 2002.

- Middle Tennessee Regional Issues: Environmental Quality Survey, Urban Land Map, Demographic Databases, Impact of Globalization, Employment by Location—Faculty presentations were held on Sept. 20 and Oct. 25, 2002, enabling grant-winning faculty members the opportunity to share the results of their research projects funded by MTSU, Earl Swensson and Associates, and the chair. All research projects dealt with issues within the Nashville Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area plus Maury and Montgomery counties.

- “Place Making” Sept. 10, 2002—Swensson attended this presentation by Peter S. Rummell at the Urban Land Institute Atlanta banquet. The chair hopes to invite Rummell to visit our region to make a presentation regarding his planned community developments (the St. Joe Company).

- Swensson conducted a series of lectures on “Synergenial Planning” at MTSU during the fall semester. Approximately 59 students, faculty, and staff attended.

- “Making Nashville Home” Oct. 15, 2002—Swensson spoke at the University Club about what the city and region have to offer and how we are responding to change.

- “Training and Continuing Education Pursuant to Public Chapter 862” Dec. 6, 2002—Public Chapter 862, passed in July 2002, requires annual training and continuing education for planners and those who advise planners. This conference was created by a partnership with MTSU, the chair, and the city and county planners in Murfreesboro/Rutherford County.


In the winter 2003 issue of Virginia Tech Magazine, an article on Swensson entitled “An Eye for Design” detailed his contribution to architecture and design and stated: “Swensson is no longer involved in [his] firm’s day-to-day business but serves as mentor to his employees and to students at MTSU, where he is Chair of Excellence in Urban and Regional Planning.”

Swensson represents the chair on the Executive Committee of Leadership Middle Tennessee, a regional leadership institute that meets monthly.

Nancy M. Bragg is assistant to the dean of MTSU’s Jennings A. Jones College of Business.