

# The Civics of Sustainability

## An Overview

BY JOEL MILLS

For those working in the field of community sustainability, reading the news these days might seem depressing. The challenges are dramatic. On April 20, 2010, the explosion of a British Petroleum oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico ignited what is now the worst environmental catastrophe in our nation's history, with estimates of the scope of the oil spill reaching as high as sixty thousand barrels per day. The Gulf crisis has highlighted America's continuing dependence on oil, and our ever-expanding carbon footprint.

Currently, even the most energy-conscious Americans have twice the carbon footprint as the average global citizen. The United States comprises about 4 percent of the earth's population but emits about 25 percent of the total global greenhouse gases. In contrast to China, the United States emits more than seven times as much per person. And compared to India, Americans produce more than twenty times as much per capita.

Patterns in consumption and energy use have been trending negative over the long run. Total U.S. emissions have risen by approximately 14 percent in the last twenty years. Most projections lead us to the conclusion that an ever-expanding population will continue to fuel this trend, exacerbating already strained resources. The nation's population reached 300 million in 2006, and it is projected to hit 350 million by 2025. Expansive land use policies and continued growth will put severe pressure on our ability to decrease our carbon footprint and adapt to a changing climate.

Our nation's condition is fragile by most estimates. In perhaps the most disturbing development, recent studies reveal that the American public doesn't grasp the severity of the challenges faced today. A recent Gallup poll revealed that 48 percent of Americans believe the threat of global warming is an exaggerated claim; the poll registered the highest percentage of doubters in the thirteen years the organization has been asking the question.

Addressing the growing urgency of climate change and national renewal will require substantial innovation and adaptation at the regional and local levels. At the local level, municipalities across the country have begun mobilizing to meet the challenge. To date, 1,042 municipalities have signed on to the U.S. Conference of Mayors' Climate Protection Agreement. With more than 81 percent of the U.S. population, cities and metropolitan regions will have a central place in strategies addressing climate change on an effective scale. In recent years, the level of interest in applying new tools to meet our challenges has grown dramatically in the public sector. In February 2009 a broad partnership launched Sustainable New Jersey as a voluntary certification program for the state's municipalities seeking to develop strategies for long-term sustainability. By August of that year, 214 municipalities across the state had signed on to the program. In May 2009, Living Cities released a report that found four out of five big cities now ranking sustainability as a top-five issue. There is little doubt that sustainability has come of age.

### The Sustainability Paradigm

In 1987, the United Nations Brundtland Commission offered what may be the definitive explanation of the term: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." However, given sustainability's broad meaning, it has been subject to a range of interpretations. In recent years, the term *sustainability* has been widely adopted by both the public and private sectors. In fact, it is so overused that it has given birth to a new lexicon, with words such as "greenwashing" (on the model of "whitewashing") gaining currency to describe the many attempts to co-opt the issue.

This edition of the *National Civic Review* is organized as a survey of community sustainability. It represents a compilation of diverse community experiences that focus on how a range of successful

strategies are being applied in community settings and on various scales, from neighborhoods and cities to regions. Each place featured in this edition demonstrates how communities are addressing sustainability within their own context, and each of them has defined its sustainable vision and goals through a unique community narrative. In particular, these cases feature some examples highlighting the critical connection between building civic capacity and achieving success toward becoming a more sustainable place.

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### The Importance of Civic Capacity

- Since 2005, the Center for Communities by Design has engaged in pro bono technical assistance projects on sustainability issues with more than forty communities. One of the common statements we hear from communities illustrates the challenge facing local jurisdictions today: “We don’t need another plan. We have plans—they all sit on the shelves. We need an implementation strategy.” The simple fact is that many communities are struggling to put in place effective structures and processes to achieve success. In some places, the politicized nature of public dialogue is driving apathy and conflict, precluding development of effective partnership and collaboration. Therefore, civic capacity—the ability to leverage all of the collective resources available in a given community toward achievement of public work—is at the heart of any inquiry about today’s success stories. Despite the negative tone of the national news cycle, we’ve found through our work that there are profoundly positive stories developing under the radar, at the local level. These stories have gone largely unnoticed, but many of them offer us unique insights into the opportunities we have to engage in transformative change. In these places, the focus is not only on what gets done but more important how it is done. How can a small city of only sixty thousand residents, like Dubuque, Iowa, leverage

its limited resources to become an All-America City and a national model for preservation and sustainability?

- How can a modest rural town such as Greensburg, Kansas, not only recover from a devastating tornado but position itself as a national leader in sustainable development, such that two presidents have referred to it as a model for others?
- How are established communities that have undergone transformative revitalization in previous eras, such as Chattanooga, Tennessee, redefining their processes for modern challenges and developing the next generation of leadership and sustainable community enterprise?

These communities all have great stories to share. In Philadelphia, civic leaders have convened the community to build a grand civic vision for their waterfront. In Los Angeles, a youthful movement of “creatives” and professionals is producing exciting new opportunities for a downtown that was long since considered extinct after enduring the negative impact of decades of city sprawl. In Tampa, a group of design professionals formed the Urban Charrette, an organization dedicated to engaging the community in a common conversation about sustainability. In Chattanooga, a new generation of civic leadership is redefining the “Chattanooga process” for the twenty-first century. Collectively, these narratives offer an illustrative group of potential models and approaches for the rest of us. In accomplishing bold, context-specific goals, they have also produced remarkable similarities in how they approach public work, and as a group they hold critical value for other communities and partners in the field.

These communities excel in their ability to engage the whole community in public work, identify common purpose, and build vibrant partnerships for success. The numbers alone speak volumes about their capacity:

- Greensburg, Kansas, engaged hundreds of people in a town of fewer than fifteen hundred.
- Philadelphia engaged more than four thousand residents in its development of a Civic Vision for the Delaware Waterfront.

- Envision Utah involved more than eighteen thousand participants in a two-year regional planning process.
- Chattanooga Stand attracted more than twenty-six thousand residents in the “largest survey-based visioning campaign” in the world.

These communities apply a variety of engagement techniques and formats to produce remarkably supportive public processes. Public involvement tools varied from online engagement to in-person engagement, from public workshops and presentations to surveys and summits—and those are just the examples from one community profiled here. The ability to supply a range of access points and a broad platform for participation enhances their ability to leverage cross-sector partnerships for success. These community processes stress the civic realm over the political realm. They are able to transcend conventional roles and dependency on the public sector by forming broad-based, cross-sector approaches to common issues. In each case, civic efforts held more weight than purely political or governmental responses to the challenge at hand. As a result, they involved a broad approach to community problem solving that leveraged a variety of local resources and assets:

- In Dubuque, Iowa, Dubuque 2.0 was formed as a process to help forge public-private partnerships to build the community’s future.
- In Chattanooga, a coalition of nonprofit leaders and citizens wanting to engage the community in a broad visioning process created Chattanooga Stand.
- In the Salt Lake City region, Envision Utah was formed to lead a regional visioning process involving many jurisdictions in discussion of long-term growth strategies.

### Keys to Success

A common caveat we hear from communities demonstrates the challenge for localities: “Things are different here. What works other places won’t necessarily work here. Things are difficult here. We have some unique challenges.” Each community has its own sense of exceptionalism in confronting sustainability issues. Local context is always important, but as these communities illustrate there are also some common ingredients for success.

It takes a vision. As the proverb tell us, “without a vision, the people perish.” Successful communities are defining collective visions of their future, and working together deliberatively to realize those visions. All of the communities involved in this edition have engaged in some form of visioning as a preliminary step in doing public work. Philadelphia has a proud claim to being the original city of grand visions. Today, it is renewing that tradition through completion of the Civic Vision for the Central Delaware. The city’s Great Expectations process leading up to its last mayoral election demonstrates the power of public processes in framing a city agenda that transcends politics. Dubuque has won a host of awards and received considerable national recognition for leveraging its historic assets to create a model sustainable district. The process was driven by the visioning and planning work the community engaged in over a two-year period, and it continues to empower stakeholders through phases of implementation. Envision Utah formed to help shape a series of growth scenarios for the Salt Lake region, and it has since expanded the work to other regions in the state, taking its visioning and scenario-building framework to a larger scale. Greensburg has redefined its community identity and set forth a bold new direction for itself that is grounded in sustainable principles.

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- Process and partnerships lie at the center of community success. Successful communities recognize that sustainability is a communitywide endeavor, and they mobilize all of their existing assets in pursuit of public work. These communities have the capacity to build novel partnerships, convene broad-based stakeholders, and involve institutions in cross-sector collaborations to achieve success. They are adept at employing a range of public processes to identify key partnerships for implementation. The Dubuque 2.0 process was designed as a deliberate attempt to create a platform for public-private partnerships, and the city has been successful in partnering with local and national organizations to implement the community’s agenda.

- The Chattanooga Stand process engaged twenty-six thousand residents in visioning surveys, using partnerships with local research partners to analyze the results and demonstrate points of convergence among potential partnering interests in the region.

### Civic Leadership and Community Renewal

One of the most important developments in many of these communities has been the presence of new civic intermediaries who are playing a critical role in imparting facilitative leadership to the broader community. In the larger urban markets, a new generation of civic leaders is emerging and leading a nascent movement for sustainable regeneration of downtown centers, new thinking about planning and design, and collaborative work on sustainability. These civic intermediaries are playing roles as both conveners and focal points for implementation:

- The Urban Charrette has mobilized dozens of local design professionals to implement important demonstration projects in Tampa, as well as facilitated an ongoing community dialogue about the future of the city.
- Chattanooga Stand describes its core mission as “citizen making” and is actively working to serve as an important connector across the community, empowering citizens to work together. Stand is now “committed to providing the community the information, tools, and resources necessary to identify shared priorities through public dialogue, build stronger connections between residents,

leaders and organizations, and collaborate to turn vision into action.”

- In Los Angeles, the Downtown Neighborhood Council’s Sustainability Committee has organized tree-planting initiatives, worked on urban revitalization and beautification projects, and actively engaged downtown stakeholders in a dialogue about a future vision for the area.

Across these communities, organizations are implementing the mantra of Jane Jacobs that “cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.”

### Conclusion

We hope that this edition of the *National Civic Review* will make a modest but valuable contribution to current knowledge and understanding about how sustainable communities evolve. Taken collectively, these communities are important examples and models regarding the key attributes of successful communities. More important, they represent an emerging narrative about how America will take on its most pressing challenges during the next half century. These communities are not only renewing and redefining themselves collectively; they are helping to redefine America and are all making important contributions to the emerging narrative of the twenty-first century.

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