

Local Governments and the Economics of Community Sustainability

BY DEREK OKUBO

The late John W. Gardner, who chaired the National Civic League (NCL) board of directors during the early 1990s, often said that the key in community change was finding ways to awaken and unleash the human potential within its residents. Indeed, our own experience with the All-America City Award and our Community Services department at NCL has demonstrated that citizens across sectors—government, business, nonprofits, and community-at-large—are capable of achieving what might previously have been perceived as impossible. Communities achieving remarkable results were effective because of the skilled ways in which people worked together to address highly complex issues.

Without doubt, sustainability is a complex topic with multiple definitions, a variety of assumptions on the part of key players, and many approaches to finding solutions. However, a number of communities have found ways to define and address sustainability so as to make sense for them. They have demonstrated that the perceived barriers to environmental health and economic development are not as formidable as once imagined. Business and environmental sustainability can work together; such a link is necessary in today's world of economic constraints and limited resources.

In the fall of 2009 the National Civic League conducted a number of interviews with city and county managers across the nation to explore how they were coping with the economic downturn. In one interview, Joyce Wilson, the city manager of El Paso, Texas, observed, "One thing is for sure. With the economic crisis, the sustainability movement now has a platform." Indeed, subsequent conversations with other managers reaffirmed Wilson's words. Their municipalities, they felt, would be in even worse financial shape had it not been for their sustainability efforts over the previous years. The economic downturn has produced challenges not seen for generations, but it has also posed an opportunity

for local governments to implement changes too politically difficult to address before now.

Uncontrolled development and sprawl meant more infrastructure and municipal services in outlying areas, and therefore more costs for local government and residents. Consequently, development had to be smarter, focusing on redevelopment and in-fill to avoid the extra expenses and take advantage of existing infrastructure and services. Changes in the economy meant that a community's retail sector had to be diverse, to offer local consumers broad choices, or else the city would lose sales tax revenue. Communities began recognizing that to become more effective in these areas, they had to find the means for working together effectively across viewpoints and interests. Doing so meant taking the time and energy to come to common understandings of the issues at hand, the desires of everyone, and the strategies to achieve them.

In this article, key staff and managers from four local governments—El Paso, Texas; Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Mankato, Minnesota; and Eau Claire, Wisconsin—were interviewed to share their insights into their own sustainability efforts. Their learning included experiences in producing internal change within their governments and in bringing about broader community change. As you read the examples, consider the actions these remarkable people took to make their hopes and dreams reality. All of these efforts are an ongoing work in progress, but there are many practices critical to the successes experienced to date. No one entity alone has (or has to have) all the answers; many players are necessary to effect change, and relationships do matter.

A Community on the Move: El Paso, Texas

The city of El Paso, Texas, has a population of about 613,000, and the county has more than 740,000. Its entire metropolitan area covers El Paso County.

El Paso is the sixth largest city in Texas and the twenty-second largest in the United States. Ciudad Juarez sits directly across the Rio Grande River, creating an international metropolitan area of more than two million people. The climate in the region is warm and arid, with piercing hot summers and mild, dry winters.

Since 2000, El Paso has been a community on the move. In 2004, voters approved a measure to change their government from a strong mayor to a council-manager form to become more responsive and add continuity in its service to residents. In 2005, a new mayor and five new council members were elected. Mayor John Cook convened a council strategic planning session to create a focus shared by the elected body. Some key ideas energized the council. Among those that emerged was for El Paso “to become the premier community in the southwest.” To do so, council members recognized that El Paso had to become more sustainable. “It was mentioned that we have to pursue sustainability or we will die,” said Marty Howell, sustainability program manager for the city. “We could not continue to do things with high costs, particularly in a tough economic time.”

In 2007, communitywide curbside recycling began to help address challenging solid waste issues. The first month revealed an astonishing 85 percent participation rate throughout the entire community. Practically “overnight,” El Paso had one of the top twenty recycling programs in the nation. The response indicated the appetite of residents for becoming more sustainable. Also in that year, City Manager Wilson was appointed to the Sustainability Steering Committee of the International City/County Management Association. In 2008, local Sierra Clubs lobbied Mayor Cook to sign the U.S. Mayors Climate Protection Agreement, a U.S. Conference of Mayors initiative to support mayors in combating global warming in their cities. The city council unanimously endorsed Mayor Cook’s signing the agreement. That same year, the city council decided that all new city buildings would meet LEED silver certification standards. (LEED is an internationally recognized standard for green building.) In 2008, the Office of Sustainability was created and Marty Howell was hired to manage it. The message was clear: El Paso was determined to be a role model,

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Soon after, Howell convened an inclusive sustainability planning process to identify clear goals and a plan of action. The process took six months, with participants meeting all day every three weeks. Transit was an obvious challenge in the sprawling city. Five years ago, Sun Metro, El Paso’s public transportation service, was in shambles; the challenges were confirmed when audits revealed serious problems. The city had begun to retrofit its buses to use natural gas in the 1990s; the city is now buying natural gas vehicles to replace those that were retrofitted five years ago, and the technology has improved since then.

El Paso also focused on energy retrofits. Lone Star Energy set aside money for local governments to dip into for energy improvements. El Paso used that money to replace signal lights with LED (light-emitting diode) bulbs in all five thousand intersections. Within eight months, the investment was paid back in energy cost savings. El Paso is now realizing savings of \$50,000 a month. The city has also retrofitted fifty-four buildings and put in energy management systems where building managers can manage the facilities remotely. The projected savings are \$20.4 million dollars over the next ten years.

City pools are heated by solar energy, producing as much as \$47,000 in savings for a single pool. The contractor for the solar panels guaranteed the savings to the city and said he would write a check if the savings weren’t met. The savings were indeed realized. The city borrowed money from the state for the solar and used the savings to pay off the loan; it is now harvesting the savings for other areas of concern. The city was also recently awarded stimulus money to change three thousand street lights, which will soon generate additional savings in the coming years.

Development and Growth

“Many residents have to travel thirty to forty minutes from outlying areas to make it to work,” noted Howell. “The housing affordability index was also out of whack.” To address the housing issue, the city rewrote “every piece of paper on development and growth in the past three years,” Howell said. The process of rewriting codes was challenging and involved a lengthy, inclusive process with builders and developers to create the new codes. “We have to nudge, nurture, and nag developers to avoid sprawl,” commented Howell. The codes have helped set standards to assist with all future development.

Currently, the city has convened a community focus on planning for four key transit corridors for bus and light rail. The goal is to create viable corridors where LEED silver-certified transit terminals act as hubs. The current challenge is getting developers to buy in during a period of economic downturn, but the mind-set is always on problem solving through the barriers that emerge. “We are looking at alternatives at every turn,” Howell said. “We are looking at abandoned buildings, malls, and such. We want to let developers know that we will go through the door for you and with you.” The sustainability mind-set is also being realized with the help of key partners such as Fort Bliss, the University of Texas-El Paso (UTEP), and community organizations such as UR-GREEN (Upper Rio Grande Renewable Energy and Efficiency Network).

Green building practices for residences are becoming the norm in El Paso. In 2004, 0.4 percent of new residences were Energy Star rated. Howell described one instance where a contractor contributed free installation of solar on a regional home builders’ association building as a demonstration. Builders saw the ease of installation (completed within two days), permitting (within a few hours), and the subsequent savings and tax credits as icing on the cake. The result was ten presales on new homes in one week. Being green is also a great marketing tool for builders and helps with long-term home affordability by keeping energy costs down.

Fort Bliss, located east and northeast of El Paso, is experiencing explosive growth, with twenty-one thousand new troops and thirty thousand family members expected by 2013. The military base is

spending \$2 million a day on new buildings—with all new buildings meeting LEED standards. Fort Bliss has been named as the Army’s Renewable Energy Center, where all new technology is going to be tested. The City of El Paso will be able to learn firsthand from the Fort Bliss experience because of their relationship.

Exploring Collaboration

The mayor saw that the many sustainability efforts in the community were fragmented, so he convened a workshop to explore collaboration. UR-GREEN was formed as a result. UR-GREEN membership includes builders, UTEP, refinery companies, the City of El Paso, entrepreneurs, home raters, and solar companies whose goal is to advance the green economy in El Paso. “They care more about the region than [about] their own organizations,” said Howell. A team from UR-GREEN was recently selected for special training with the Green Jobs Academy through the Institute for Sustainable Communities in Washington, D.C. The partners look forward to applying their learning to new programming in El Paso.

Howell is constantly out in the community, meeting with residents and organizations and exploring multiple ways of getting the word out. Websites, newsletters, breakfast meetings, meetings with local nonprofits, green organizations, and federal agencies all build the relationships required for effective collaboration. The activities and meetings have revealed a desire on the part of key players to turn many isolated events into integrated events to coordinate activities and produce greater impact. “We feel very strongly that we can’t be successful unless we have deep support from the community,” Howell said. “We have to have that support in order to move to the next level.”

One challenge he noted was overcoming the notion that sustainability is basically “tree hugging” and that business and environmental concerns don’t mix. Sustainability relates to community health, however, and green efforts have proven to help with the bottom line. Another challenge is to find the money up front to start new efforts. “We are constantly trying to find ways to do things without adding a dollar of cost,” Howell added.

Another challenge is when stakeholders have a single-issue focus and act as though their one area of interest is the most important and must be addressed above everything else. Overcoming narrow focus meant a lot of conversation, sometimes in planning sessions and other times one-on-one, but the sustainability planning process assisted greatly in helping people see how everything was connected and not singularly focused. Creating a shared vision helped set a target and was later helpful in refocusing people when necessary.

Howell said one of his most significant roles is as matchmaker, connecting diverse groups to vendors and businesses. “Since I’m here, everyone who is curious and interested comes to me,” he explained. “Every time I give a talk, I get waves of emails afterward. Without this position, where would they go? I am a hub. I may not know much about biodiesel, but I know who does. I connect those people together.

“El Paso investing in a sustainability office and hiring a program manager is a strong statement,” he said. “That the manager and council hired someone shows the level of commitment of the city. It creates the very real perception that this is important.” With the commitment of the elected body, the city manager, and a passionate and approachable program manager, El Paso is well on its way to turning sustainability into reality.

The Value of Partnerships: Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Chapel Hill is home to the nation’s oldest public university, the University of North Carolina (UNC). The school was chartered in 1789, the same year the town of Chapel Hill was chartered, and in many ways the community resembles a company town. Today, the town covers nearly twenty square miles and has a population in excess of fifty-four thousand residents; the university has twenty-eight thousand students of which ten thousand live on campus and the rest reside in the community. The university and town share the community’s main corridor, Franklin Street, on which UNC owns several buildings. As a result students, faculty, and residents regularly come into contact with one another.

Because of the progressive attitude and focus on innovation, UNC has played a significant role in advancing new ideas for the town. One example was a fare-free transit system for all residents in Chapel Hill. UNC students actually voted to place a fee on themselves to pay for the transit so it would benefit the entire community. Students noticed that lower-income residents had to pay for the service while they could show their student identification and ride free. “It became an equity issue for the students,” said Chapel Hill City Manager Roger Stancil. Staff and the UNC administration also saw it was easier to pay for transit than to fight for more parking and parking decks.

Chapel Hill is a community where a resident can drive five minutes and be in the country, where residents can buy eggs from local farmers. Urban boundary planning and preserving the small-town character are priorities that were set a number of years ago by the council in accordance with the desires of residents. An “active living by design” approach focuses on land use patterns that promote walkability. “We are built out, so all development is multiuse and transit oriented,” said Stancil. “Every new development has to have components of housing, commercial, and retail.” Open space is a community priority, and the town has set aside a thousand acres that will never be developed. Citizen advisory boards and commissions related to sustainability are another aspect of partnering with residents.

When UNC pitches the university to potential faculty and students, Chapel Hill’s quality of life is one of the selling points used to attract students and faculty. This feeling of being a part of a livable community is an important basis for the collaborative partnership between the town and the university. The partnership began in 2004 when the university approached the town to talk about potential changes to carbon emissions in Chapel Hill. UNC had participated in a global conference in the United Kingdom and made a pledge to initiate activities in its hometown. The town was receptive to the idea and since that time has received a lot of assistance from the university. The first step was placing a graduate intern to help monitor emissions. This led to additional capstone courses that were project- and client-based, in which questions brought up by

departments were explored and answered during the semester. UNC's approach to the town was timely. It wasn't long afterward that a town committee began to focus on sustainability. An ordinance was enacted for town buildings to meet LEED standards, and the city fleet began to look at alternative fuels and greater efficiency. This approach and assistance from UNC have helped produce a 9 percent drop in fleet emissions since 2005.

Grow Local, Buy Local

The town, with the help of the university, chamber of commerce, and local businesses, created a Grow Local, Buy Local campaign. "We don't have huge chain stores such as Kohl's and Wal-Mart. We have small, local entrepreneurs," said Stancil, "but we are still outpacing the state in local sales. Residents shop and eat locally. All the local restaurants list the local farmers they buy their products from. It's a movement that has been around for a long time and has helped save us during this economic downturn."

The university continues to play an important role in local sustainability efforts. For instance, a UNC student group called HOPE (Homeless Outreach Poverty Eradication) at UNC came to the town council and asked them to consider supplying land for a community garden to go along with a project for the homeless. The community garden would be a jumping-off point for people experiencing homelessness to assist them with life transitions. The town gave access and surface rights to a vacant fourteen-acre plot for creating the garden. Last fall the student group and the town's Parks and Recreation Department put in the infrastructure for the garden. Community sponsors were recruited for each plot, to either work it themselves or sponsor others to use the plot for \$100 a year. Men from the shelter are transported to the site to work the garden for their own benefit and the community's. The ribbon-cutting ceremony for the garden was held in April 2010.

Less Water, More Savings

Another sustainability partnership is among the town, area school districts, Niagara Conservation (which donated the equipment), Orange Water and Sewer Authority (OWASA), and the UNC Institute for the Environment. Students installed new toilet

fixtures in five units of a public housing development. They wrote a report to the council that focused on the goal of the project, what the audit told them, the approach taken, and the interim results: a 30 percent reduction in water consumption. The council was thoroughly impressed and asked themselves what more they could do. What started with fixtures in five units ended up placing fixtures in all public housing units (all with 3.5-gallon-per-flush toilets or better) with the use of Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds. "The decrease translates into cost savings and ultimately impacts home affordability," explained John Richardson, who heads the town's office of sustainability. "In the same vein the program is now looking at home energy audits and conservation measures. OWASA, UNC Institute for the Environment, and 36 South [a local energy auditing company] are collaborating with the town on the project."

The Importance of Place: Mankato, Minnesota

Located in south central Minnesota, Mankato is the Blue Earth County seat (the name refers to the fertile ground, which has a bluish tint). Mankato's population is in excess of thirty-six thousand. With North Mankato at its side, the total population of the Mankato/North Mankato region approaches fifty thousand residents. Mankato is home to Minnesota State University (MSU), whose student population is estimated to be around seventeen thousand. Three smaller private colleges are in the region as well. Location is an important part of the city's identity; there is an appreciation of the abundant natural resources, wilderness areas, and forests. Simply because of the natural beauty of the region, awareness of preservation is widespread.

In the early 2000s, Mankato became a state leader in water reclamation. It started when the city took advantage of an opportunity. A gas-fired turbine power plant was built and had a need for water for cooling. The city began collecting and treating wastewater, producing a high-quality effluent that is now being used for cooling and irrigation. Additionally, the city invested about \$40 million in a treatment facility for domestic water, making a conscious effort to move away from tapping deep aquifers. In the long run, these two elements will sustain water resources and allow growth without dependency on additional sources of water. In the same decade, the

city converted a coal plant to a waste plant that focuses on recycling. They also created strong urban boundary and sprawl programs in place and collaborated with other towns along municipal boundaries and outlying areas to put in growth agreements. Planning practices since the 1990s and through the 2000s always included environmental and impact studies.

A New Vision

In 2006, the greater Mankato region completed a community visioning and strategic planning project that was convened by the cities of Mankato and North Mankato, the chambers of commerce, Greater Mankato Economic Development, and Mankato State University. The eight-month process, facilitated by the National Civic League, had a core stakeholder group that was consistently two hundred-plus at the ten meetings. The work teams met regularly between sessions as well. “The Envision 2020 process provided an opportunity to get [sustainability] into the community,” said Paul Vogle, director of community development. “It put everyone on the same page and allowed the political momentum necessary to move sustainability forward.”

Local initiatives focused on green protection areas along the river, open space, environmentally friendly development approaches, and green buildings. During the process, Blue Earth County was in the design phase of a new county building. On the basis of input from the stakeholder group, the plans were redesigned. The new county building is designed to LEED silver standards and is currently undergoing certification. This demonstrated a commitment by the county and a contribution to other efforts that have snowballed. In fact, a variety of buildings in Mankato have been retrofitted, and all new buildings (public and residential) are being designed to receive LEED silver certification. Local architectural firms are now focusing their building designs to meet those green standards.

The visioning process reinforced the desire of residents to preserve the local ecosystem, a viewpoint that has emerged across perspectives and sectors. For example, in the Hilltop section of Mankato (a forested hill targeted for additional residential development) it spurred interest not just in preserving

trees but in drainage and development and open space. Residents, the city, financial institutions, developers, and builders alike realized that taking all of the variables into consideration saves money because not every part of a development has to be graded. Development can take advantage of the natural land. “Developers liked it,” Mankato City Manager Pat Hentges said, “and residents liked it because it makes housing more affordable too.”

Because of the Envision plan, the Mankato region now enjoys a riverfront park, a natural habitat park, and stronger conservation efforts in rural areas. Transportation studies were once concerned only with roads. Now they also focus on bikes and walking. From Envision, an advocacy group emerged that is handling the bicycle aspect of the transportation plan, further illustrating the positive role of residents in helping implement the plan. Another goal from the plan was to get the region designated a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), which would place them in a better position to venture into regional initiatives.

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Citizen Advocacy Plays Key Role

Both Hentges and Vogle feel the strongest qualitative indicator of success is the number of diverse partners involved in moving the initiatives forward. There is strong support from businesses, the university, cities, towns, the two counties in the region, and residents. The Envision process has moved many of the activities to advocacy groups and less-traditional institutional groups. Citizen advocacy groups are playing a key role in planning for transportation and energy conservation. The advocacy groups do not work in a vacuum and regularly partner with local institutions. For instance, electrical meters to help residents monitor the energy efficiency of their homes are now available for checkout from local libraries. Neighborhood associations that used to focus on parochial issues are now key participants in helping make homes in the neighborhoods more efficient.

Support from local officials has also increased as they learn more about the potential cost savings associated with green initiatives. “With the tough economic times, policy makers are saying we have to do it,” noted Hentges. “The savings with infrastructure and the ease with which we can deliver services has helped a great deal.” The water initiatives have already shown dividends. Accessing aquifers costs money; the water reclamation plant is now treating waste at a higher level and effluent trading credits are realized so that savings can be focused on other areas of need.

A Clear Vision: Eau Claire, Wisconsin

A number of factors converged around 2007 to make Eau Claire, Wisconsin, a leader in the sustainable community movement. As with Mankato, the Eau Claire region was in the process of completing a community-based visioning and strategic planning process called Clear Vision, where a number of sustainability goals emerged. The city council adopted a resolution to make Eau Claire an “ecomunicipality,” incorporating ecological and social justice values into its charter. The economic crisis was emerging for local municipalities, forcing the city to look even more closely at cost efficiencies. Finally, the International City/County Management Association was also focusing on sustainability as a key goal area with its internal strategic plan.

Also that year, City Manager Mike Huggins sent a staff person to a green building conference. “He came back all jazzed,” recalled Huggins. “And so we created an interdepartmental Green Team that focused on the things we should be doing internally to have a coherent program as an organization. The Green Team had to spend time defining sustainability and why we should care. We had to get an operational policy definition. We realized we couldn’t be saving the entire globe.”

Building capacity within staff was an important step. Getting the various departments to participate in creating the work plan was hard work, but the process of working together produced an understanding that being more sustainable as a governmental organization was a priority. It meant carving out time for people to work on the issues while dealing with the fiscal crunch that every municipality faced. Every

department had its own perspectives on how sustainability had an impact. Huggins said having the broad departmental focus made the process longer, but the buy-in ended up in a stronger plan. Through the discussions, they were able to bring it all together such that every city office was contributing to create benefits, both within their own departments and governmentwide.

Impressive Results

The city is tackling a number of areas, with impressive results. For the past thirty years, they have incorporated systems to capture methane at the sewer treatment plant and convert it to meet the electrical needs of the plant. This practice produces a savings of a little over \$200,000 annually. Since 2000, the water treatment has used geothermal energy to help run the plant. Hobbs Ice Arena has three sheets of artificial ice and uses heat recovery from the ice chillers to run other equipment in the facility.

The city used a \$500,000 energy performance contract to make HVAC improvements to city hall, which guarantees an annual \$73,000 energy savings. They implemented expanded use of electronic transmittals and revised procedures to reduce total organizationwide photocopies by 23 percent annually, which resulted in a 32 percent reduction in the total cases of paper purchased.

In 2008, the city changed all paper dispensers in public restrooms to an electronic type that reduced paper towel use by 50 percent. In 2007, the city also replaced 122 toilets at a city housing project for an annual reduction of 2.3 million gallons of water used and \$9,200 in annual savings. In the same year, they replaced water closet flush systems at city hall to yield an annual savings of 750,000 gallons in potable water.

Organizing the Effort

While the governmental practices were progressing in Eau Claire, sustainability efforts within the community (driven by organizations, schools, and coalitions) were both abundant and fragmented. Huggins realized that organizing the various sustainability efforts was going to be necessary in order to bring the desired benefits. The city adopted an amendment to the comprehensive plan to include a sustainability chapter. The city, in partnership with community

groups, schools, Clear Vision (a large community-based strategic planning effort), the Green Team, and the university worked together to put all their mutual sustainability ideas into an organized chapter. A series of community workshops were also implemented to help generate specific policies that created the chapter.

During the Clear Vision community process, sustainability was identified as a priority area. One of the goals is to get other local governments to become eco-municipalities throughout Eau Claire County. The task force, made up of community residents, is in the process of meeting with all Eau Claire County governmental bodies (thirteen towns, two villages, three cities, and the county board) to promote interest in becoming official sustainable communities and adopting the Natural Step Framework for sustainability. The Natural Step is a nonprofit organization with origins in Sweden; it offers a framework toward creating a sustainable society by focusing on economic, environmental, and social aspects of community.

In late summer of 2009, the Clear Vision Eau Claire Sustainability Task Force began working with Eau Claire County Extension and Joining Our Neighbors Advancing Hope (JONAH), a faith-based coalition that focuses on environmental justice, to bring an EcoTeam community sustainability initiative to Eau Claire County households, businesses, churches, and neighborhoods. EcoTeams are groups that are formed in neighborhoods, workplaces, churches, and other gathering places to furnish tools and practices that are implemented to make the community more sustainable, and to have fun while doing it. EcoTeams became a second initiative presented to county governmental boards when Clear Vision visited with them about becoming eco-communities.

By mid-January of 2010 fifty-seven people and forty-one households were working on or had completed the six-step process for EcoTeam development as presented in *The Green Living Handbook*, by David Gershon. Church groups, neighborhood associations, civic groups, and workplaces in Eau Claire County communities have adopted the EcoTeam approach. “The civic infrastructure is so strong here in Eau Claire,” Huggins said. “We are very citizen-run.

The city has always been open to partnering, and it is having an effect with sustainability. We are now even seeing sustainability rippling through our professional associations.”

Conclusion

One of the key elements for success in these four community sustainability programs was recognizing that local government is a role model for the broader community. If local government was unwilling to change, how could they expect the community to do so? “Local government has to be a role model,” noted Eau Claire’s Huggins. “We have to exercise stewardship with how we as an organization practice sustainability first before branching out to the community.”

Creating an internal governmental structure such as a sustainability office can help overcome internal turf and power struggles. It also signals that local government is serious about sustainability. John Richardson, who heads the Chapel Hill Office of Sustainability, noted the importance of approaching sustainability with departments in an encouraging way—no slap-on-the-wrist approaches—and creating a culture through interaction by identifying things together and “embarrass them with their successes.” The sustainability office is currently developing and designing a sustainability award for individuals and divisions.

“The key is to get employee involvement and to get their say in how sustainability can be applied,” noted Richardson. “The 2010 work plan takes one of three approaches: explore and gather information and propose recommendations for action to the manager; pilot project-testing the projects; and implementation of projects where we go full bore. It’s a phased approach, like climbing a ladder.”

Another critical element is having a prioritized plan of action for both local government and the community as a whole. “Some view sustainability as the panacea,” Richardson said. “The reality is that sustainability is a goal and is something you work toward. It is such a huge topic that it’s easy to become overwhelmed. My advice is to prioritize and create a manageable plan and achieve some early success.”

“Have a plan to point to,” urged Howell of El Paso’s Office of Sustainability. “Our plan has different focus areas and provides a real benefit to remind people that we have a direction and specific priorities. One of my primary roles is using the plan and building the type of support necessary to move things forward.”

Communication was absolutely essential to strengthen the key human factors of building relationships and trust—the basis for developing strong partnerships to move sustainability forward on a communitywide basis. “Clarity as to what you mean when you say ‘sustainability’ is crucial,” said Howell. “People will be thinking a variety of things when you say it. Define what you mean by sustainability.”

Sharing information on the “payback time” on investments and the subsequent savings also supplies the necessary proof to change mind-sets. “Find success stories where the triple-bottom-line items are being achieved, and share them—constantly,” Howell said. “Demonstrate that it is already working! It makes economic sense and community sense. We are saving money. The investment is worth it.”

Huggins agreed that showing tangible cost savings helped. The savings that occurred allowed city departments to use those resources to further capital improvements. For example, solar panels were installed to heat public swimming pools throughout the city; the payback was realized within three to five years. Seeing the results has helped build the case for investing more in the future.

Having an open and honest dialogue is critical, said Hentges of Mankato. “Dialogue is the key to all of this,” he said. “As a result, there is a strong will and ease with which initiatives and policies can be implemented and produce the progress that we’re seeking. We now have a variety of forums where this

type of dialogue can take place. We’ve gotten better at it, and the dialogue has become easier.”

Finally, willingness to build partnerships, both likely and unlikely, is crucial. Sustainability is too complex a challenge for local government to tackle alone. “Tapping into universities is a two-way street of benefits,” said Richardson. “Students benefit by working and learning in real-world situations, and we benefit by being able to tackle a variety of areas.”

Get environmental agencies, such as the regional office of the Environmental Protection Agency, involved in working with planners and have open and honest dialogue about the issues. Regulating agencies aren’t necessarily good planners, and planners aren’t necessarily aware of environmental impacts. Getting them together early in the planning process helped the implementation in the long run. Another suggestion is to call on people with technical expertise to help with options. In the case of the Mankato region, this meant partnering with MSU and businesses to help others think things through.

All of the officials interviewed for this article shared the insight that they still view their efforts as a work in progress. They recognize that mistakes, conflicts, and unforeseen challenges are a natural part of the process. Sustainability is a change in culture; it is a process and not an event. Nevertheless, these municipalities show that the change can happen with some quick wins and then snowball into broader community change.

Reference

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