

# Local Governments, Social Equity, and Sustainable Communities

ADVANCING SOCIAL EQUITY GOALS TO ACHIEVE SUSTAINABILITY

## CASE STUDY SERIES



ADVANCING SOCIAL EQUITY  
**in Clark County,**  
**Washington**



**ICMA**

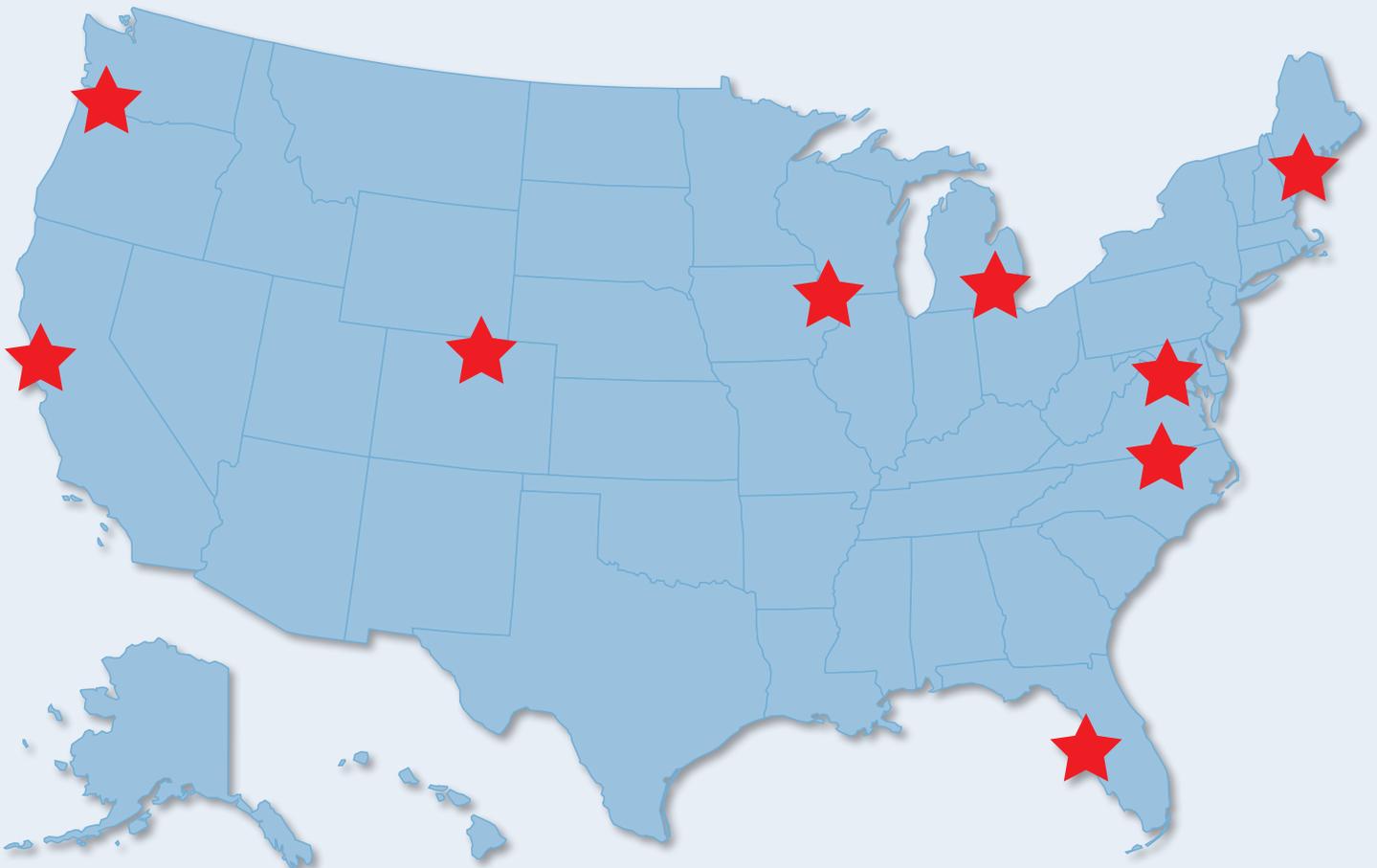
# ABOUT THIS PROJECT: ADVANCING SOCIAL EQUITY GOALS TO ACHIEVE SUSTAINABILITY

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This research was conducted by ICMA and Arizona State University to identify and describe current activities, leading practices, and achievements of sustainable communities created through a comprehensive, integrated approach supported by inclusive engagement. Based on results of the ICMA Sustainability Survey in 2010, a follow-up survey was sent to 300 local governments whose original responses showed high levels of sustainability activity. Using results from the follow-up survey and primary and secondary research on leading social sustainability practices around the United States, nine communities whose responses indicated high levels of social equity-related activity were selected for case studies. Case study communities include the following:\*

- Washtenaw County, MI (Pop. 344,791) and Ann Arbor, MI (Pop. 113,934)
- Dubuque, IA (Pop. 57,637)
- Hayward, CA (Pop. 144,186)
- Manatee County, FL (Pop. 322,833)
- Lewiston, ME (Pop. 36,592)
- Durham, NC (Pop. 228,330)
- Arlington, VA (Pop. 207,627)
- Clark County, WA (425,363)
- Fort Collins, CO (Pop. 143,986)

Each case study details findings from individual communities that provide insight into how they have been able to promote social equity and achieve greater social sustainability through their policies, programs, and other activities. Data was collected primarily through face-to-face interviews and secondary sources.



\*Populations based on 2010 Census base.

# Advancing Social Equity Goals to Achieve Sustainability: Case Study Series

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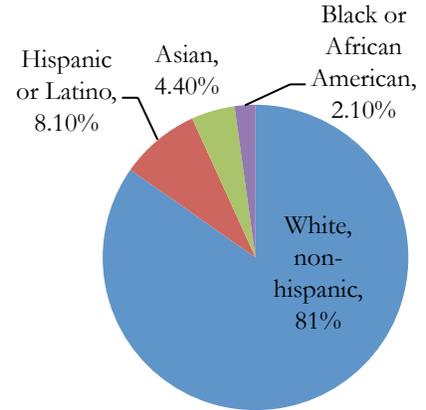
*Advancing Social Equity in Clark County, Washington*  
By Tanya Watt, Arizona State University

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## Community Profile

- **Form of Government:** Council-administrator
- **County Commission:** Seven commissioners
- **Demographic Information (2012):**
  - **Total Population:** 437,871
  - **Poverty Rate:** 12%
- **Annual Budget (FY2013):** \$848,284,522 budgeted expenditures
- **Sustainability and Outreach Annual Budget:** \$1.3 million
- **Sustainability Plans and Strategies:** In 2007, the Board of Clark County Commissioners adopted a one-page sustainability policy that was expected to be extended into a full plan but eventually was not. The 2012 Growing Healthier: Planning for a Healthier Clark County report addresses social equity.
- **Number of Environmental Sustainability-Related Staff:** 9 FTE
- **Major Social Equity Activities in the Community:** Public health, food access, aging, affordable housing



Population by Race (2010)

### Findings in Brief

- **FINDING 1** –An alternate organizing strategy (focused on public health) has been successful in structuring a cohesive response to concerns about economic vitality, environmental sustainability, and equity in access to community resources.
- **FINDING 2** – Elected leadership is crucial in allocating resources for the planning and implementation of holistic sustainability and social equity strategies. In the absence of such support, staff may turn their attention to fostering an educative relationship with elected officials instead of focusing on implementation strategies.
- **FINDING 3** – Positive partnerships and collaborations with local nonprofits and institutions of post-secondary education produce outcomes that support the community.
- **FINDING 4** – Proactive strategies can help communities achieve sustainability and related goals.

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## **History of Sustainability and Social Equity in Clark County, Washington**

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Clark County is a dynamic local government with dedicated public servants who are pursuing social equity and sustainability goals, though not coordinated under a “sustainability” umbrella.<sup>1</sup> It is located in beautiful and picturesque southwest Washington. The Columbia and Lewis Rivers border it, and there are three separate port districts with their own elected boards of commissioners who are responsible for the maintenance of various ports. The county seat, Vancouver, is directly across the Columbia River from Portland, Oregon. Because housing is much more affordable in Clark County and the population is significantly less densely concentrated, many people live in Vancouver and the surrounding area but commute to Portland for work.

Vancouver’s population of over 165,000 makes it the largest city in the county of 438,287, with the remainder of the county population spread across 629 square miles. The county, which is adjacent to state and national forests, is largely rural, which can present accessibility challenges for those residents who are served by the health and human services programs based primarily in Vancouver, but there is an effort to extend public transportation options to those who would benefit from them. It is also easy for residents who seek particular social services offered in one state or city but not the other to travel across state lines to access them.

The county’s proximity to Portland is a topic that regularly comes up in conversation. While in Portland bumper stickers abound entreating residents to “Keep Portland Weird,” in Vancouver, the plea is to “Keep Vancouver Normal.” Clark County is slightly more conservative than Washington State as a whole, and its residents seem proud of its reputation as a suburban and rural mecca in juxtaposition to its more famously eccentric, liberal neighbor to the south. Consistent with this suburban and rural feel, the county is very car dependent and is dotted with food deserts. Although a number of local government administrators have discussed the prospect the perception of increasing diversity, census data puts the white population in the county at 87.9%.

The county has a commission-administrator form of government. The administrator is responsible for the county budget (just over \$848 million), operations, and development. While the administrator is currently appointed by the commission, the position may change to elected executive in 2014. The county also has three commissioners who serve concurrently as its Board of Health.

There is currently one coordinator devoted exclusively to sustainability with eight other staff members working in support of environmental sustainability goals. Sustainability activities are spread throughout all levels and departments within the government. While the local government does not have a stand-alone sustainability plan, its current general planning process is under way and it is anticipated that a number of environmental sustainability initiatives will be included.

In 2007, the Board of Clark County Commissioners adopted a brief sustainability policy, which states, in part:

Clark County is committed to fostering a safe, secure future that conserves natural resources while meeting basic human needs, including clean water, air and food, along with shelter,

education, and employment. This commitment to a sustainable future will be a key consideration in making public policy, developing public programs, operating public facilities, and delivering public services.<sup>2</sup>

At the time, it was expected that the one-page policy would be extended into a full plan, but county priorities shifted and a fully articulated plan did not come to fruition. Nevertheless, this policy did articulate a continuing effort at including sustainability as an integral and key consideration in policy and program development. As part of the initial effort, the county established aggressive environmental objectives and internal targets, and it produces an annual performance report on its sustainability progress that focuses largely on progress toward these internal targets, such as reducing residential vehicle commutes and county vehicle fleet fuel consumption, and increasing green purchasing and energy conservation. This reporting mechanism is extensive and tracks progress on very specific indicators against 2007 measures. The effort to quantify, benchmark, and continue to report on the greenhouse gas emissions of specific county activities is outstanding.

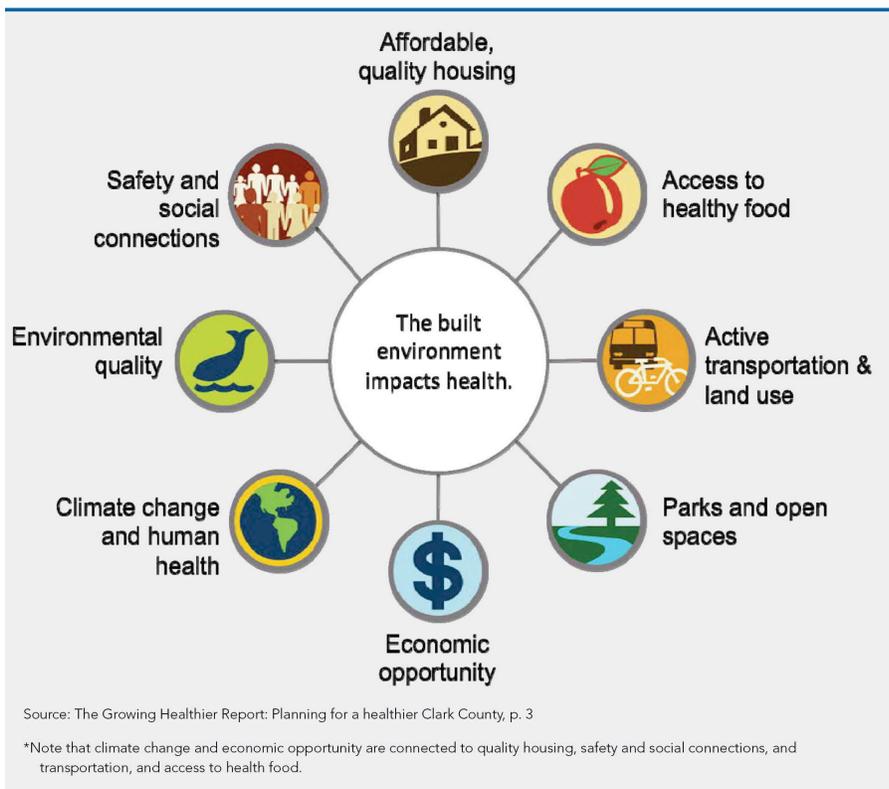
The county's general sense of the importance of social equity is evident both internally and in its community-wide efforts. Several years ago, after a significant evaluation of its internal practices, the county made a number of human resource adjustments and purposely filled director-level positions with highly qualified minority candidates. In terms of external activities, social equity has been framed as a public health issue. Beginning in 1996, Clark County Public Health published its first report card detailing findings on illness and associated risk factors. After this initial report, the county committed to producing a report card every three years. In 2009, it undertook an even more ambitious project and oriented the year's report card toward a significantly expanded understanding of the determinants of public health. This report established a holistic framework that is remarkably (although not intentionally) consistent with sustainability concerns. The framework includes the following topics in the general socioeconomic, cultural, and environmental conditions category: economic vitality, employment and income, education, active transportation/transportation options, environment, accessibility of food, and social environment: connectedness and exclusion.<sup>3</sup> Although the county has not integrated social equity initiatives under a sustainability umbrella, through this report it has moved in the direction of framing its public health initiative as a sustainability issue.

The *2012 Growing Healthier: Planning for a Healthier Clark County* report, published by the Clark County Public Health Advisory Council and Clark County Public Health, takes this approach even further.<sup>4</sup> This report represents a significant undertaking; it took 15 months to draft because of the extensive background work it required. Each subcategory has its own report in order to establish how the concern is related to public health in the community, as well as baseline indicators demonstrating the current performance of the community relative to the concerns listed. The areas covered in this report parallel the areas researched for this report.

## Findings

### **FINDING 1 –An alternate organizing strategy (for public health) has been successful in structuring a cohesive response to concerns about economic vitality, environmental sustainability, and equity in access to community resources.**

In Clark County, the phrases “climate change” and “sustainability” are politically sensitive. Sustainability objectives are phrased primarily (sometimes exclusively) in terms of cost savings. Perhaps because of its long-standing commitment to public health, the public health lens allows for serious concerns to be comprehensively addressed in a way that the sustainability lens may not be able



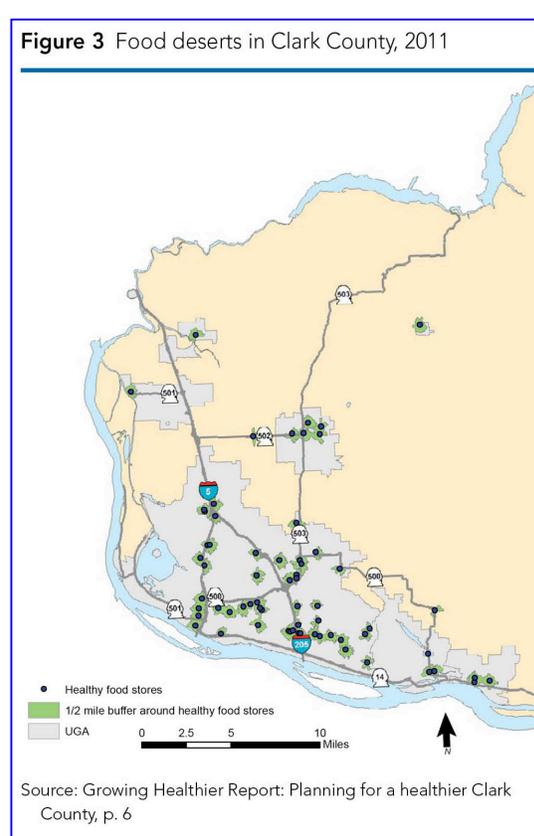
to achieve. As noted above, in 1996, Clark County Public Health published its first report card detailing findings on illness and associated risk factors in the community. After this initial report, the county committed to producing a report card tracking these issues every three years. The report card was presented as a list of comparative statistics related to different public health issues in the county versus the state.

In 2009, the county oriented the year’s report

card toward a significantly expanded framework that included the following topics under “general socioeconomic, cultural, and environmental conditions”: economic vitality, employment and income, education, active transportation/transportation options, environment, accessibility of food, and social environment: connectedness and exclusion.<sup>5</sup> Citing racial disparities in poverty, education, and health indicators, this report focused on health equity in the community, and many of the issues included in it were explained in terms of their impacts on health equity. The approach taken in 2009 established initial indicators for the included topic areas and provided the preliminary background information necessary to integrate the indicators in a manner that expanded the dialogue around public health. The 2009 report began to address why people should care about the issues identified and what could be done to address those issues.

The 2012 *Growing Healthier: Planning for a Healthier Clark County* report presents goals, objectives, and policies/strategies at the end of each section. Some of the items are actionable by administrative staff, and some require action by elected officials. The 86-page main report visualizes each of the areas examined as interrelated with the built environment, which greatly enlarges the scope of a more traditional public health perspective. The illustration below reveals how closely the conversation around public health in Clark County parallels sustainability concerns expressed in this report. When addressing the impact of climate change on public health, the report notes: “Air quality is affected by hot, dry summers. The climate increases the risk of smog and the likelihood of pollution from wildfires. Small particles suspended in the air are a by-product of fuel combustion, forest fires, allergens, and ground-level ozone (smog) which will all increase due to warming temperatures. As these particles are inhaled into the lungs, they increase the risk of infant mortality, cancer, respiratory disease, asthma, heart attack, and stroke” (37). This explicit link between social equity and the primary sustainability environmental concern, greenhouse gas emissions, clearly demonstrates how the public health frame is facilitating movement on issues of sustainability. Additionally, the climate change section of the report addresses concerns of disease and pathogen vectors in altered weather patterns and how this disproportionately affects those of lower socioeconomic status; in-migration patterns that predict that the Pacific Northwest will be an attractive place for people to move to as the weather continues to warm; flooding and drought probability; and the dependence of Clark County on imported food.<sup>6</sup>

Other sections of the report directly address the social equity component of sustainability. The maps in Figure 1 and Figure 2 below show food deserts



and public transportation access for the county.

According to the report, in 2011, 27% of the population in Clark County lived within a five-minute walk of public transit. Note the density of the public transportation options presented, which increases substantially in urban Vancouver while decreasing substantially in the more rural areas to the north of the county. The report suggests a number of tools for improving transportation alternatives, and it specifically focuses on adjusting the built environment to facilitate pedestrian, bicycle, and public transportation access to more of the county's urban growth area (UGA).

According to the report, the areas shown in green are one-quarter mile away from a source of healthy food, whether a supermarket, farmer's market, local produce stand, or grocery store. The areas in gray are considered to be food deserts within the county's UGA; they are more than one-quarter mile away from a healthy food source. Driving around the county confirms the message that this map conveys: there are a number of areas, particularly in lower socioeconomic parts of the county, where access to healthy food is limited and clusters of unhealthy food outlets abound. The report suggests a number of actionable strategies, from rezoning to providing incentives for healthy food outlets to locate in a UGA desert area. The report also specifically suggests targeting youth, low-income, minority, and elderly residents with a number of strategies in order to facilitate their ability to access healthy food, such as enabling local farmer's markets to accept the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

**FINDING 2 – Elected leadership is crucial in allocating resources for the planning and implementation of holistic sustainability and social equity strategies. In the absence of such support, staff may turn their attention to fostering an educative relationship with elected officials instead of focusing on implementation strategies.**

Prior to the 2012 election, elected leadership had played a crucial role in establishing sustainability and social equity objectives. Throughout interviews with county staff, former commissioner Mark Boldt was widely credited with prioritizing issues of public health, aging readiness, livable communities, and other objectives consistent with sustainability concerns. The 2012 election cycle changed the ideological balance of the Board of Clark County Commissioners to the right, resulting in a change of priorities relative to public health, sustainability, and social equity objectives. This altered the focus and priorities of staff. Many of the resources committed to social equity and sustainability have been reallocated in accordance with the recalibrated priorities of the new board.

An example of Boldt's contribution as a champion of community wellness is the Commission on Aging's work in developing the Aging Readiness Plan. Vanessa Gaston, director of community services for Clark County, described countywide preparations being made in anticipation of the changing needs of aging members of the community—what she referenced to as the “silver tsunami.” To address the needs of an aging population, the county's Aging Readiness Task Force and Community Planning team developed a thorough Aging Readiness Plan, which was finalized in 2012.<sup>7</sup> Boldt, who was instrumental in establishing the Commission on Aging in June 2012, is cited in the plan as noting that Clark County's goal is to be a great place in which to “grow up and grow

old.” Using census data, the report establishes the trend of upward growth in the number of seniors in the community, with anticipated growth in the demographic by 158% from 2005 to 2030, at which time one in four county residents will be over 60 years old. The report then goes on to establish priorities to address the changing needs of residents and the subsequent demands that may be placed on local government resources.

The Aging Readiness Plan is broken into five sections:

- Healthy Communities, which considers how the built environment might be constructed in order to facilitate mental and physical health
- Housing, which addresses both affordability and accessible universal design that can accommodate the changing needs of individuals in different phases of life
- Transportation/Mobility, which addresses both safety for senior drivers and public transportation and walkability issues for those who no longer drive
- Supportive Services, which is meant to facilitate independence for seniors in transition
- Community Engagement, which is meant to create and facilitate opportunities for seniors to maintain civic and other relational connections to the community, as well as to promote opportunities for continued learning in the population.

For each area under consideration, the plan provides background information and then an assessment of the county’s current situation, along with an examination of how the community wants to address related issues going forward. A number of strategies are suggested to address observed deficiencies and preferences expressed through community engagement processes.

When addressing the built environment, the plan seeks to foster physical and mental health along with a more general sense of inclusion. A number of the suggestions for addressing identified issues are broadly consistent with ideas articulated through Smart Growth and Complete Neighborhood research: density that includes a combination of homes, shopping, and restaurants; safe sidewalks and access to areas set aside for recreation; paths and trails for walking and cycling; and numerous food choices and access to healthy food options. The plan considers safety in design and development of streets in order to facilitate seniors’ ability to continue to drive. It suggests transitioning to brighter stoplights and larger fonts on signs as they need to be replaced.

Pam Brokaw, executive director for local nonprofit Partners in Careers, noted that the Aging Readiness Task Force was an exceptional community process that was truly engaging. The commission did not put the solution before the process but rather allowed community decisions to emerge in accordance with the priorities and concerns articulated by residents. A number of strategies in the report that are meant to directly benefit seniors, improving their safety and quality of life, will in turn benefit all members of the community. For example, efforts at developing universally accessible affordable housing, improving streets to facilitate senior safety, increasing access to public transportation, and increasing access to caregiving resources will all have a positive impact on multiple segments of society. A safer, more accessible and inclusive community benefits everyone. Additionally, all the strategies will proactively facilitate the ability of community members to age in place.

### **Planet Clark Emerald House**

Clark County's Planet Clark Emerald House is a reflection of the county's commitment to sustainable, affordable, quality housing that facilitates residents' ability to age in place. Coordinating with a number of nonprofits and Washington State University (WSU), the recently finished home has universal design features, is incredibly energy efficient, and has zero runoff from storm water.<sup>8</sup> In collaboration with the local chapter of Habitat for Humanity, the home is occupied by a low-income family who also participated in its construction.

Built on a county-owned site that had been abandoned and was severely neglected, the home demonstrates the benefits of the "three E's" approach to sustainability: economy, environment, and equity. Economically, the project rehabilitated an abandoned property and created green construction jobs in the process. Environmentally, the project is presented as a locus of native plants, innovative approaches for addressing storm-water runoff, reduced water requirements, and reduced greenhouse gas emissions from improved energy efficiency. In terms of equity, the project is framed as a low-emission, high quality-of-life place for the occupants and increases civic capacity building in terms of the volunteer labor that went into it. Accessible by public transportation, the home is based on universal accessibility principles to facilitate the homeowners' ability to age in place. The family moved into the home in fall 2013.

An example of sustainable, affordable residential development, the home is both a residence and a tool for education on sustainability and social equity issues. From inception to finalization, the public has been invited to participate in the project.

### **FINDING 3 – Positive partnerships and collaborations with local nonprofits and institutions of post-secondary education produce outcomes that support the community.**

Partners in Careers (PIC) and WSU have collaborated with the county on 78th Street Heritage Farm, a 79-acre site that the community uses as a sustainable food source. The site was maintained by the county as a poor farm during the late 1800s and early 1900s. In the 1940s, the farm was leased to Washington State College (now WSU) for research purposes. In 2008, the county reassumed primary responsibility for the site while promising to maintain an ongoing relationship with the university. After a successful community engagement process to gather feedback regarding the preferred use of the site, it was determined that the site would remain agricultural and be used as a resource for education and food production to benefit local residents. It is specifically intended to provide a healthy and sustainable food production environment.

The site has been divided into sections, which are maintained by different community groups for a variety of purposes. One acre has been dedicated to the 4-H Restorative Community Services Garden that is set aside for at-risk youth. Supported by the Clark County Juvenile Court system, the project gives the youth the opportunity to participate in a constructive activity that benefits the community while teaching them cooperation and other valuable social skills. The participants learn how to tend a garden and are taught the value of healthy eating while cultivating plants that will ultimately produce food for the local food bank. The project has yielded 1,700 pounds of produce donated to the county food bank. In 2012, 217 youth participated.

The two-acre Roots to Road program at the site is maintained in partnership with PIC, a local nonprofit that is dedicated to developing individual self-sufficiency through job training and employment services. In 2012, eight individuals participated in the program. The majority of the participants have been veterans. The program facilitates small-scale training, but it also allows for a network of camaraderie to develop among participants who are often healing from physical and mental wounds as they transition to civilian life. The program has donated 8,000 pounds of produce to a number of local food banks.

Ten acres have been specifically donated to the Clark County Food Bank. The site is maintained with community volunteers, Churches in Partnership, and the Larch Corrections Center. The site has produced over 50,000 pounds of produce for the food bank. Community gardening plots are 20 x 20 feet and available for \$60 per year, and plots are available that are compliant with the American with Disabilities Act. The community garden is so popular that space is allocated in a random drawing. The community garden sites are frequented by community members who do not have adequate resources in their homes to cultivate individual gardens. Community gardeners keep the produce they grow and benefit from free classes by master gardeners who have been certified through a partnership with WSU. All the plots in the community garden are pesticide free. The Master Gardener Foundation maintains the only certified organic garden on the site; three acres large, it has produced over 5,000 pounds of donated produce.

The community is committed to maintaining the space at Heritage Farm as a resource that benefits all of its members. The site supports the rehabilitation of veterans as they transition to civilian life and at-risk youth who may not otherwise have the means to contribute constructively to their communities. In addition, the site is meant to be a tool for education on the importance of environmental stewardship.

The 78th Street Heritage Farm site is an example of “front to back” commitment to social equity through a tool of environmental sustainability. This space came to life because the local government worked with community members to determine how to best use county-owned land. Through extensive engagement activities, the county realized that the community preferred to preserve the farm as a resource for education and sustainable farming instead of selling it for private development. The county has used this land to facilitate transitional programs, to encourage community participation in a healthy and sustainable activity, and to facilitate feeding the hungry. Overall, this site is a unique physical space in which sustainability concerns about environment, economy, and equity coalesce.

**FINDING 4 – Proactive strategies can help communities achieve sustainability and related goals.**

Clark County hired consultants to help consider plans for green buildings using the county’s planning code and identify roadblocks that impede sustainable development. Proactive strategies such as this can be useful in a number of situations. Clark County has a number of administrators and projects demonstrating an enduring commitment to sustainability and social equity. While its rural nature and proximity to the landlocked Portland area portend a drive for expansion and

development, it has taken steps to address this pressure in a positive manner that increases the ability of community members to access services while reducing environmental pressures in the region. Sustainability and social equity efforts are diffused throughout the departments in the city.

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## **Challenges and Future Plans**

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Public health has been an area of focus that has facilitated the community's ability to address many environmental and equity concerns. Through a number of data-driven and proactive tools, including the *Growing Healthier: Planning for a Healthier Clark Report* and the Aging Readiness Plan, the county has identified a number of future issues that should be addressed. By inviting broad community participation, it has prioritized actions and strategies on the basis of the input of community members. Through Planet Clark Emerald House, it has physically manifested its priorities of sustainable residential development by embodying universal design principles. And through the 78th Street Heritage Farms site, the county has further demonstrated a commitment to providing community members with a tool for sustainability education and access to healthy foods.

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## **List of Study Participants**

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The author of this report conducted interviews with seven individuals familiar with social equity-related issues in Clark County, Washington during a site visit on August 4-6, 2013. The author wishes to thank the following individuals for their contributions:

- Bill Barron, county administrator, Clark County (retired in September, 2013)
- Pam Brokaw, executive director, Partners in Careers (PIC)
- Pete DuBois, Sustainability and Outreach Program coordinator, Clark County
- Vanessa Gaston, director, Community Services, Clark County
- Oliver Orijako, director, Community Planning, Clark County
- Sharon Pesut, operations manager, Partners in Careers (PIC)
- Marni Storey, interim director, Public Health, Clark County

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## **Resources for Further Reading**

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- *Growing Healthier: Planning for a Healthier Clark County* report can be found at [http://www.clark.wa.gov/public-health/community/growing\\_healthy/documents/GrowingHealthierReport23Mar2012-1.pdf](http://www.clark.wa.gov/public-health/community/growing_healthy/documents/GrowingHealthierReport23Mar2012-1.pdf).
- The 2009 Clark County Community Report Card can be found at <http://www.clark.wa.gov/public-health/reports/documents/CCReportCard2009Final.pdf>.
- A local news channel produced a segment on the Roots to Road program at Heritage Farm. The video can be found at <http://www.katu.com/news/local/Veterans-find-strength-through-farming-program-178463181.html?tab=video&c=y>.
- Clark County Aging Readiness Plan can be found at [http://www.clark.wa.gov/planning/aging/documents/12-0207\\_ARTF\\_Plan\\_Final\\_Maps\\_Complete\\_Print.pdf](http://www.clark.wa.gov/planning/aging/documents/12-0207_ARTF_Plan_Final_Maps_Complete_Print.pdf).
- A brief video on Planet Clark Emerald House can be found at <http://emerald.planetclark.com/homepage-featured/emerald-house-dedication-video/>.

## **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> Clark County has a Sustainability and Outreach Division with a focus on Solid/Hazardous Waste and Recycling with a crossover to sustainability. The department's mission is to strategically protect and enhance the county's natural environment.

<sup>2</sup> Clark County Sustainability Policy accessible at <http://www.clark.wa.gov/news/documents/SustainPolicy.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> *Community Report Card 2009: A Report on Clark County's Progress Toward Creating a Healthy, Livable Community*, p. 3. <http://www.clark.wa.gov/public-health/reports/documents/CCReportCard2009Final.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> The Growing Healthier: Planning for a healthier Clark County report can be accessed at [http://www.clark.wa.gov/public-health/community/growing\\_healthy/documents/GrowingHealthierReport23Mar2012-1.pdf](http://www.clark.wa.gov/public-health/community/growing_healthy/documents/GrowingHealthierReport23Mar2012-1.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Community Report Card 2009: A report on Clark County's progress toward creating a healthy, livable community, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> According to the report, in 2007 90% of the food consumed in Clark County was imported.

<sup>7</sup> The Clark County Aging Readiness Plan can be found at [http://www.clark.wa.gov/planning/aging/documents/12-0207\\_ARTF\\_Plan\\_Final\\_Maps\\_Complete\\_Print.pdf](http://www.clark.wa.gov/planning/aging/documents/12-0207_ARTF_Plan_Final_Maps_Complete_Print.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Storm-water runoff was discussed extensively by planning personnel and the sustainability coordinator, as it is both a major challenge for the area and an opportunity to address a serious environmental concern in proactive and innovative ways.

**ICMA**

