

Local Governments, Social Equity, and Sustainable Communities

ADVANCING SOCIAL EQUITY GOALS TO ACHIEVE SUSTAINABILITY

CASE STUDY SERIES



ADVANCING SOCIAL EQUITY
in Fort Collins, Colorado



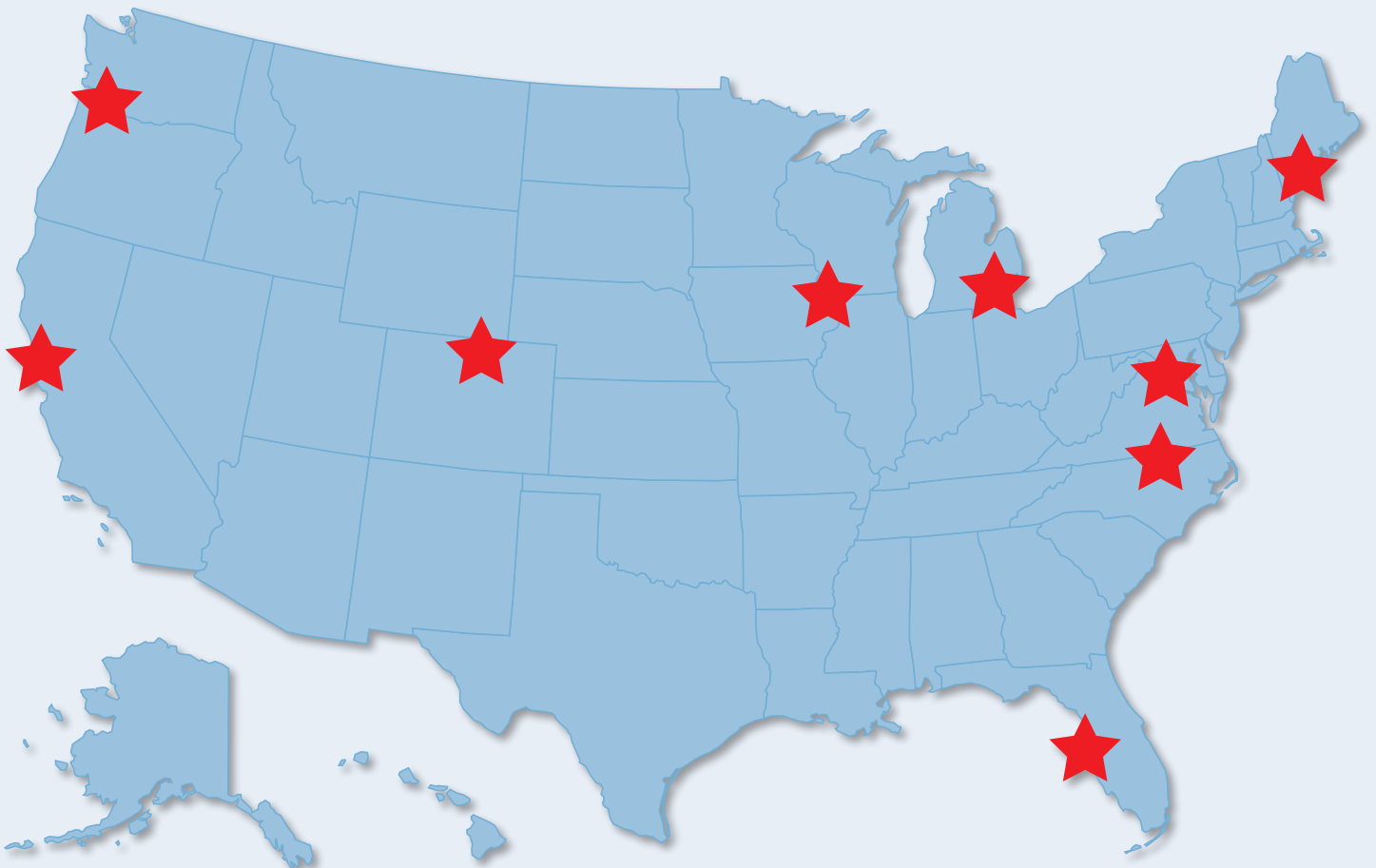
ICMA

ABOUT THIS PROJECT: ADVANCING SOCIAL EQUITY GOALS TO ACHIEVE SUSTAINABILITY

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

Advancing Social Equity in Fort Collins, Colorado

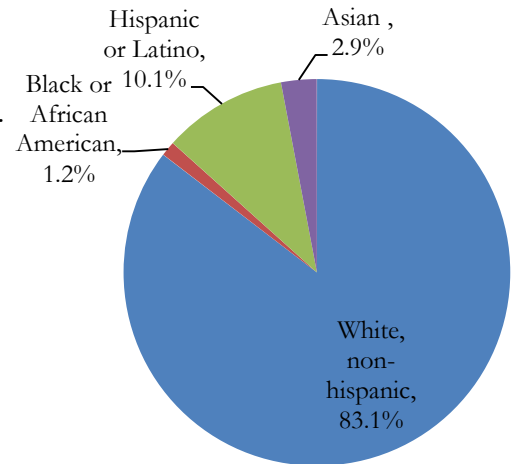
By Tanya Watt, Arizona State University

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Community Profile

- **Form of Government:** Council-Administrator
- **County Commission:** Seven councilors including the mayor.
- **Demographic Information (2012):**
 - **Total Population:** 148,612
 - **Poverty Rate:** 18.1%
- **Annual Budget (FY2014):** \$484.9 million
- **Sustainability Budget:** \$9,337,176
- **Sustainability Plans and Strategies:** City’s Action Plan for Sustainability (2004), city’s Environmental Policy (2009)
- **Major Components of Sustainability Plans:** Goals for carbon, electricity and natural gas, fuel, solid-waste reduction, education and outreach, funding, parks and natural areas, water, general purchasing, employee safety and health, and local food
- **Number of Staff Dedicated to Sustainability:** 27 FTE
- **Location in Government:** Sustainability Services is a service area out of the city manager’s office that includes the Economic Development, Environmental Services, and Social Sustainability Departments
- **Major Social Equity Activities in the Community:** Integrated strategic plan for sustainability



Population by Race, 2010

Findings in Brief

- **FINDING 1** – While clearly articulating sustainability goals for a local government or community is important, committing the resources necessary to move that strategy forward is equally important.
- **FINDING 2** – Physically reorganizing departments can facilitate collaboration toward realizing sustainability objectives. Specifically including environmental, economic, and equity offices within one cohesive unit can help move closer toward pursuing holistic sustainability objectives in a community.
- **FINDING 3** – Formalizing a social sustainability department increases the amount of focus on and allocation of resources to addressing social equity issues.
- **FINDING 4** – Sustainability can be simultaneously pursued both laterally and vertically. A centralized sustainability office does not preclude the participation of other offices in achieving sustainability objectives. The Natural Areas program provides a representative example.

History of Sustainability and Social Equity in Fort Collins, Colorado

About an hour north of Denver, Colorado, Fort Collins is the kind of town that invites exploration. Surrounded by 41 natural areas purchased with citizen-initiated city and county sales taxes, the community has a long history of supporting an environmentally friendly way of life. In 1998, Fort Collins, Longmont, Loveland, and Estes Park all invested in the Platt River Power Authority and became the first cities in Colorado to use wind power. In November 2013, the city voted in favor of a five-year moratorium on fracking within city limits (56% to 44%). In December 2013, the Colorado Oil and Gas Association filed suit against the city saying that drilling laws are not the purview of the city and that only the state can enforce such laws. While the lawsuit may take many months to see resolution, the moratorium reflects the community's inclination to side in favor of caution with regard to environmental issues.

Fort Collins is home to Colorado State University. Fifty-two percent of the city's nearly 150,000 residents have a bachelor's degree or higher (compared to 36.7% of state residents), and over 95% of adults have earned a high school diploma. The presence of the university clearly influences the diversity and reported incomes in the community. It also offers some unique opportunities for the city to collaborate with researchers in a variety of fields. City Manager Darin Atteberry is quick to point out, however, that the successes that the city has had in addressing some sustainability issues can be replicated through creative community partnerships that do not necessarily rely on the presence of a university to succeed.

The downtown area is dotted with appealing local shops, restaurants, and public art. In the center of downtown, a bicycle library offers free bike checkouts for residents and visitors. The bicycle library is maintained by a partnership between Bike Fort Collins (a local nonprofit), the City of Fort Collins, New Belgium Brewery, Crankenstein (a local business), the Downtown Development Association, and the Downtown Business Association. The bicycle library is visible evidence of a commitment to cycling that seems embedded in the community.

Within its 54.28 square miles, Fort Collins boasts over 30 miles of trails available to cyclists. Additional evidence of the city's commitment to cycling is found in one of the local government buildings, which has dedicated an entire office to storing the bicycles that many employees use to get to and from work. The League of American Bicyclists has designated Fort Collins a Platinum Bicycle Friendly Community, one of only four communities to receive that distinction.¹

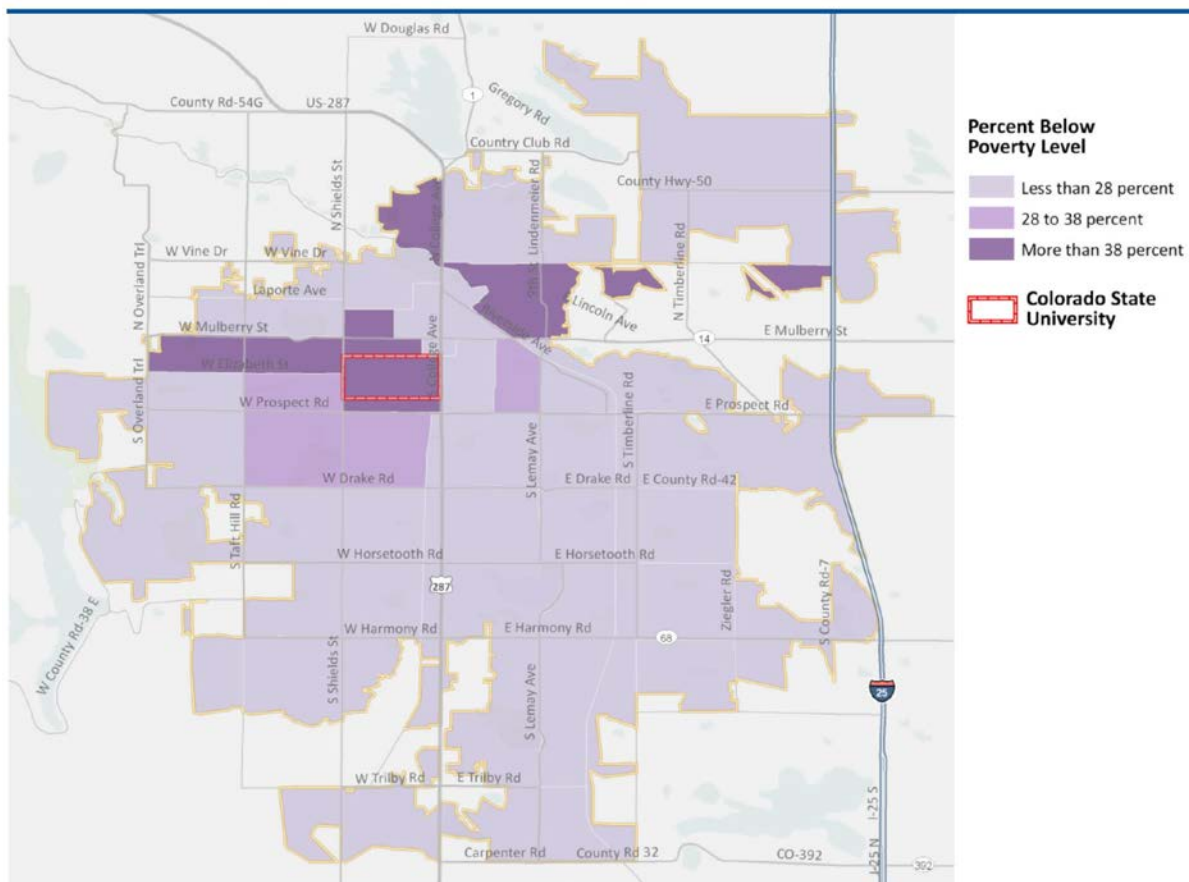
Fort Collins's Unique Emphasis on Social Sustainability

Fort Collins is exceptional in many ways. While many local government sustainability plans begin with an expressed concern about the "three E's" (economy, environment, and social equity), few pursue a comprehensive approach to sustainability in a structured and formal way. Fort Collins has specifically established a Sustainability Services Area headed by a chief sustainability officer who reports directly to the city manager and oversees three departments: Environmental Services, Economic Health, and Social Sustainability. The city is deeply integrating "triple bottom line" (TBL) thinking into the organization. While every city department pursues some sustainability objectives and every service area thinks through the social, economic, and environmental implications of its

decisions, the city’s centralized office coordinates sustainability efforts in a unified, targeted, and specific manner.

In Fort Collins, social sustainability is conceived as a vehicle primarily geared toward addressing housing, transportation, diversity, and social services issues. Opportunities for appropriate employment and health equity are also integrated into the goals of this service area. When discussing social sustainability, Bruce Hendee, the city’s chief sustainability officer, references Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.² He suggests that the basic needs of community members must be met before members can be asked to participate in addressing bigger sustainability issues. As part of its social sustainability framework, the city recently contracted with consultants to complete a gaps analysis.³ This analysis identified issues that might be addressed in a more efficient and effective manner to improve the quality of life for all community residents. One of its primary findings was related to home affordability, which has become the primary focus of the Social Sustainability Department. Between 1989 and 1999, the price of homes in Colorado increased by over 100% while incomes increased just over 56% during the same period. As part of a follow-up process, the Social Sustainability Department is conducting a Housing Affordability Policy Study. The first stakeholder meeting for this study was conducted on March 12, 2014.

Percent of Persons Living in Poverty, by Census Tract, City of Fort Collins, 2006–2010



Source: *Social Sustainability Gap Analysis: City of Fort Collins draft report* prepared by BBC Research & Consulting and submitted for public comment January 2014

Many residents of Fort Collins consider themselves to be tolerant and open to diversity, but according to the 2012 census, the community is rather racially homogenous, with 89% of the population identifying as white. The next largest group is Asian Americans, at 2.9% of the population. The census notes that the median income for households in Fort Collins is \$53,359, which is around \$100 more than that for the state overall, but the poverty level is over 18%, which is about 5% over the poverty rate for Colorado. The gaps analysis attributes part of this disparity to the presence of the university, as students who claim Fort Collins as a permanent home are likely to earn far below the median income for the city and may inflate the reported poverty level. However, this does not completely explain the poverty in the area. Using American Community Survey data, the gaps analysis includes the map shown below, which depicts poverty by census tract and shows that while some reported areas of poverty are closely tied to the university location, others are not. The gaps analysis notes that single-parent and minority families are more likely to experience poverty than other members of the community. The poverty rate in Fort Collins is 34% for African Americans and 27% for Hispanics.⁴ The concern regarding poverty relates directly into an overarching concern about affordable housing in the city, and this concern is seen as a primary issue that the Social Sustainability Department must address in collaboration with its community partners.

Findings

FINDING 1 – While clearly articulating sustainability goals for a local government or community is important, committing the resources necessary to achieve them is equally important.

Fort Collins has a council-manager form of government, and many staff members stress the importance of a supportive council in addressing sustainability issues. A collaborative relationship with a diverse city council has helped clarify sustainability goals and secure the resources necessary for achieving them. Hendee explains that the council has very high expectations but is pragmatic; it wants to see results and is very supportive. The innovative reorganization of city offices in order to address sustainability more holistically, which the council approved in 2012, required creative thinking of how the offices can work together.

For City Manager Darin Atteberry, Fort Collins is a working lab for innovation where collaboration is a tool to achieve positive outcomes in the most efficient way possible. Creating a Sustainability Services Area that includes Environmental Services, Economic Health, and Social Sustainability departments is a means of bringing “cylinders of excellence” together to achieve greater things than they could achieve apart. Atteberry prefers the phrase “cylinders of excellence” over “silos,” suggesting that cylinders can be very efficient and effective as they move from isolation to collaboration.

Fort Collins was the first local government in Colorado to have a sustainability plan. Its sustainability goals were initially articulated for the internal local government as opposed to the community at large. Articulating goals and targets establishes baseline expectations; one such goal, for example, is to achieve an 80% reduction in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions relative to 2005

levels by 2050. Hendee noted that the city hopes to meet that goal by 2030 instead. The city has also committed the financial and human resources required to meet its goals. As it expands its sustainability efforts (with a new Sustainability Strategic Plan anticipated toward the end of 2014), continued financial, organizational, and human resources will be necessary to meet its goals. As Atteberry suggested, articulating a vision consistent with community values is important, but effectively providing the necessary resources to realize that vision offers another dimension of legitimacy to the project and is therefore essential.

FINDING 2 – Physically reorganizing departments can facilitate collaboration toward realizing sustainability objectives. Specifically including environmental, economic, and equity offices within one cohesive unit can help a community move closer to realizing its holistic sustainability objectives.

Physical reorganization can facilitate purposeful collaboration among partners who otherwise might not get the chance to work together. Economic health, environmental services, and social sustainability dimensions of issues are best addressed when advocates from all three perspectives work together to address common issues, projects, and programs.

When speaking to City Manager Atteberry, two things immediately become apparent: he has a strong vision for the city, and he knows how to secure the resources to realize it. His vision for sustainability in Fort Collins is articulated through the triple bottom line (TBL): social sustainability, environmental sustainability, and economic sustainability. And to secure the resources needed to achieve it, Atteberry named Hendee his chief sustainability officer in 2011. When Hendee joined the city, he spent a year researching organizational strategies in local governments that address sustainability so that he might develop a sense of best practices and how they could be successfully applied in Fort Collins. In 2012, the Fort Collins city council approved an internal reorganization to create the Sustainability Services Area, headed by Hendee and housing three departments: Social Sustainability, Economic Health, and Environmental Services. This created a “Green Cabinet,” a single point of contact for addressing sustainability issues. It effectively brought three cylinders of excellence together to collaborate and leverage the expertise housed in each department in support of the others.

The reorganization physically manifests TBL thinking, and one of the goals of the Sustainability Services Area is to embed this thinking into every city process and program. Hendee hopes that a decisionmaking tool combining qualitative and quantitative components can ultimately be made available to all city offices to help them think through the TBL dimensions of the decisions they make. Right now, a tool called Triple Bottom Line Analysis Map provides some assistance toward accomplishing this objective, but it is primarily qualitative in nature. Hendee seeks to refine the tool to facilitate evidence-based, data-driven approaches to public problems. The city council has provided funds for the upgrade and revisioning of this tool.

Josh Birks, economic health director, suggests that sustainability is often envisioned as trade-offs among economic, environmental, and social objectives, but in Fort Collins sustainability is focused on abundance and increased outcomes, and each area is made better through collaboration with the

others. Economic growth is framed as the pursuit of the right growth, with a strong focus on improving the community for all residents through leveraging markets for good. Environmental Services is broadly about stewardship of resources to benefit all members of the community. Social sustainability is framed as addressing the needs of the community in such a way that members can participate more broadly in sustainability and other activities.

The reorganization to physically embody TBL thinking is still rather new, but it is already affecting the way local projects are approached. Hendee draws attention to a recent mall redevelopment project, in which the city council asked the Environmental Services Department to think through ways that GHG emissions could be reduced throughout the project life. The social sustainability dimension was considered through questions about whether enough jobs of sufficient wage would be created or maintained through the project. Lucinda Smith, environmental services director, notes the benefit of being able to develop specific recommendations for the project: “Because of the collaboration among all three departments, site-specific recommendations could be cultivated for more impact than might otherwise have been achieved. The economic question of return on investment through sales tax completed the picture, and all dimensions were given consideration when determining an incentive package for the project. Smith notes the benefit of an interdisciplinary team when approaching projects like this. Sometimes costs and benefits are not fully contemplated when departments work alone, but bringing all three advocates for sustainability to the table better ensures that each dimension of the TBL is addressed.

In three separate conversations, each department director noted that the different departments in the Sustainability Services Area continue to learn how to collaborate in order to accomplish integrated goals. In addition to integrated and seamless TBL thinking organization-wide, Hendee sees opportunities for social sustainability to expand its focus to address local food and urban agriculture, LGBT issues, and health and wellness more broadly. Fort Collins maintains a dashboard of performance measurement indicators, including economic health and environmental indicators, that residents can access to receive timely information on whether the city is achieving its goals.⁵ Hendee hopes to include more information on environmental health issues, new information on poverty reduction, and even a happiness index. The 2012 Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index lists Fort Collins as fourth in its top ten mid-size communities.⁶

FINDING 3 – Formalizing a social sustainability department increases the amount of focus on and allocation of resources to addressing social equity issues.

When the reorganization to the Sustainability Services Area took place in early 2012, the Economic Health and Environmental Services Departments were obvious choices for inclusion in the new area. The Social Sustainability Department was the last to be created. Efforts at addressing homelessness, affordable housing, and other social issues had become spread out across many different departments, and the city council wanted one point of contact for these. According to Joe Frank, the director of the Social Sustainability department of the Sustainability Services Area,⁷ the case needed to be made that his Advance Planning Office was the appropriate fit to address social sustainability concerns and thus should become the Social Sustainability Department. His office spends about half of its time working on affordable housing issues and half of its time working on

other social services issues. It is responsible for coordinating \$2 million in annual grants, and its collaborative partnership with local nonprofits is very important to its success.

The Social Sustainability department sees itself as a partner in addressing social issues and a convener or facilitator that can bring many partners to the table to have a dialogue that might not otherwise happen. Frank commented that the city is not capable of addressing every social need, and it is better suited as a partner that can leverage financial and organizational resources in support of achieving social goals. This view was echoed by City Manager Darin Atteberry, who sees government paternalism as an ineffective way of addressing public problems and strongly prefers a convener, planner, and strategic partner role.

There were several areas that the city council had laid out as priorities for the Social Sustainability office:

- Affordable housing
- Homelessness
- Transportation
- Fair employment opportunities
- Early childhood education & affordable, quality childcare
- Equity and diversity issues
- Health resources
- Access to local food

Frank spoke to the difficulty of establishing good metrics and “moving the dial” in addressing social problems. Some measurements, like shelter counts and affordable housing are easier to count than whether the city government has had an impact on making Fort Collins a more diverse community. So many social problems are deeply embedded, entwined with each other, and persistent in spite of many generations of effort at resolving them. Frank noted that the city government is data-driven and wants to support evidence-based best practices.

When meeting with Frank in November 2013, his department was one-and-a-half years old (created in June 2012) and included six full-time employees with four of them devoted to managing federal grants. As part of an effort to become more strategic and focused on achieving specific goals, he worked with the Chief Sustainability Officer, City Manager, and City Council to contract with several consultancy groups to develop a gaps analysis report. A draft of the report was issued for public comment in January 2014, one month after Frank retired from public service. The goal of the report, in part, was to identify all community partners and what their main objectives were and the subsequent gaps in meeting community needs. It was also hoped that this would help the city better understand how it could best collaborate with other leaders and identify what the most effective role for the city might be. This gaps report will also be a tool for the development of the city’s overall sustainability plan, to be drafted during 2014.

When thinking through social sustainability, Frank noted that the effort at integrating the environmental, economic, and social dimensions of sustainability was ongoing in Fort Collins. The reorganization put the pieces into place, helped the team to work well together, and allowed for ongoing collaboration; but it was not necessarily a seamless transition since each of the areas had been accustomed to addressing issues on their own. Each department continues to have some responsibility that is not part of the overall collaboration, so each group has a dual mission of

advancing the department's own work while also advancing the overall Triple Bottom Line perspective through more extensive collaboration on joint projects. Frank commented that the idea of social sustainability is still relatively new. Environmental issues have been on the radar for more than two decades in Fort Collins, and economic concerns have been ongoing. While there is a lot of enthusiasm around the social sustainability dimension, it is still becoming embedded as a partner with its more established counterparts. Frank emphasized the importance of senior leadership in the creation of his department and ensuring that the effort at embedding it is ongoing. He gave a lot of credit to the City Manager, City Council, and Chief Sustainability Officer for consistently addressing attention to integrated Triple Bottom Line thinking and taking it seriously. Having social sustainability represented at the table means that concerns about access, particularly for low-income individuals, can always be heard along with concerns about the economic and environmental dimensions of particular programs or processes.

FINDING 4 – Sustainability can be simultaneously pursued both laterally and vertically. A centralized sustainability office does not preclude the participation of other offices in achieving sustainability objectives. The Natural Areas program provides a representative example.

A Sustainability Advisory Board made up of senior staff from across city offices is in place to try to ensure that “triple bottom line” thinking is embedded across the organization. While a centralized Sustainability Services Area provides a means for targeted and sustained coordination toward holistic sustainability objectives for the entire city, sustainability in Fort Collins is about an embedded perspective city-wide. While it is the job of the Sustainability Services Area, it is everyone's responsibility.

Fort Collins has undertaken a long-term project to preserve open spaces in the community. A commitment to preservation of these open spaces began in 1972. In the 1990s, a series of taxes was approved at the city and county levels to continue funding the purchase of open spaces in order to accomplish several goals:

The mission of the City of Fort Collins Natural Areas Program is to protect and enhance lands with existing or potential natural areas values, lands that serve as community separators, agricultural lands, and lands with scenic values. Protection of natural habitats and features is the highest priority, while providing for education and passive recreation for the Fort Collins community.⁸

Forty-one sites encompassing more than 11,000 acres have been preserved thus far, providing access to natural areas to all local residents. Naturalist volunteers are available for educational tours and facilitate field trips. A number of free family friendly events are hosted throughout the temperate months to invite children on hikes or to teach them about constellations during a night viewing party. One of the natural areas is home to migrating bald eagles, and the department currently is hosting viewing parties for those interested in observing the eagles.

The Natural Areas department is in the process of reviewing and renewing their plan during January 2014 in preparation of presentation to the city council in the summer. The department is hosting multiple open house events to invite community input on its priorities. It seeks to ensure that the department goals align with community values.

Environmental Services Director Lucinda Smith noted that the departments in the Sustainability Service Area are moving together toward finding the nexus of the Triple Bottom Line model; they are working to uncover the sweet spot in which they can maximize the perspectives that they each bring to the table so that their work multiplies the benefits of sustainability for the community. City Manager Darin Atteberry believes that Fort Collins is at the front of an organizational practice that will become more common because of the practicality of the model. Regardless of the environmental ethic of the community, this model facilitates collaboration that yields more efficient and effective results. Atteberry also notes that reorganizations bring together interdisciplinary partners that may not have otherwise had the opportunity to work together. Because of this multimodal and highly collaborative dimension, new departments may need time to determine how to best accomplish goals, but once the area fully gels, results are more efficiently achieved and timelines between articulated goals and their realization often dramatically shorten.

When asked about how success in pursuing sustainability objectives is best achieved, City Manager Darin Atteberry noted several key factors: executive leadership with a clear vision that will drive innovation and hold teams accountable, pay for performance that aligns with a clearly articulated vision, aligning organizational resources with the vision to be achieved, transparency and efficiency throughout the process, bringing the right people onboard to operationalize the vision, continued engagement with the process, and persistence. He suggested that, while it may be more enjoyable to work with groups whose priorities are always aligned as they pertain to sustainability objectives, one area people broadly agree on is stewardship principles. Elected leadership or other members of the community who may be ideologically opposed to sustainability still want their children and grandchildren to have access to the resources that allow them to achieve a good quality of life. A “do no harm to future generations” message is broadly appealing. While environmentalists may not include all perspectives, people more generally appreciate responsible stewardship of resources that have been entrusted to public care. Atteberry suggests that the city manager plays a key role in educating elected officials about that stewardship role.

Challenges and Future Plans

Josh Birks, Fort Collins’ Economic Health Director, noted that too often it seems sustainability is motivated by a fear of scarcity, where people fear that if they do not act resources will be restricted. In his view, this approach to sustainability causes narrowing of vision and puts primacy on the environmental dimension of sustainability. When describing his view of Fort Collins’ approach, he suggests that the city has organized around a belief that working collaboratively can increase and improve outcomes for everyone. Through the shared efforts of the environmental services, economic health, and social sustainability departments, sustainability becomes a means of improving

quality of life for every member of the community. “Net-zero is a great goal, but net-positive is more exciting,” City Manager Darin Atteberry suggests.

Fort Collins is in the enviable position of having strong leadership with a strong vision and the commitment to legitimize that vision by providing the resources required to move that vision to fruition. In individual conversation, each person referenced triple bottom line thinking and the importance of an integrated approach to sustainability. The newly formed Sustainability Services Area has some successes already with many more anticipated as a completed Sustainability Plan is prepared with the city over the course of the next year.

List of Study Participants

The author of this report conducted interviews with six individuals familiar with social equity-related issues in Fort Collins, Colorado during a site visit on November 22-23, 2013. The author wishes to thank the following individuals for their contributions:

- Darin Atteberry, city manager, City of Fort Collins
- Bruce Hendee, chief sustainability officer, City of Fort Collins
- Josh Birks, economic health director, City of Fort Collins
- Joe Frank, social sustainability director, City of Fort Collins (retired December, 2013)
- Lucinda Smith, environmental services director, City of Fort Collins
- Emily Wilmsen, public relations coordinator, City of Fort Collins

Endnotes

¹ For a list of the 215 League of American Bicyclists city rankings, see

http://www.bikeleague.org/sites/lab.huang.radicaldesigns.org/files/Fall2013_BFCMasterList.pdf

² The progression goes from physiological needs (food, shelter, clothing, and a life-sustaining environment) to security needs (physical safety and an orderly environment), social needs (acceptance and a sense of belonging), esteem needs (self-respect and the respect of others), and, finally, self-actualization or self-fulfillment needs (full development of individual abilities and a satisfying personal life). See Abraham H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper, 1954).

³ *Social Sustainability Gap Analysis: City of Fort Collins* draft report prepared by BBC Research & Consulting and submitted for public comment January 2014 Found at <http://www.fcgov.com/socialsustainability/pdf/gapsdraftreport010814.pdf>

⁴ Reference: *Social Sustainability Gap Analysis: City of Fort Collins* draft report pages 4 and 5

⁵ Fort Collins’ dashboard can be found at <http://www.fcgov.com/performance/measurements/>

⁶ 2012 State of Well-Being: Community, State and Congressional District Reports can be found at

<http://cdn2.hubspot.net/hub/162029/file-21855213-pdf/wbi2012/2012wbi-aggregate.pdf?t=1364237833000>

⁷ Joe Frank retired in December, 2013 but was in his position when interviews for this case study were completed in November, 2013.

⁸ Land Conservation and Stewardship Master Plan 2004 (to be updated in 2014), p. 1. Available at <http://www.fcgov.com/naturalareas/pdf/napp-update.pdf>

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