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# A Sustainability Primer for Local Governments

BY NANCY SCHNEIDER

Understanding the picture of sustainability for an entire city can be a daunting task for city managers, mayors, commissioners, council members and city staff. “How is it defined? Where do we begin?” are typical questions. And in today’s economy, “How much is it going to cost?” always tops the list. Not to fear. A plan can be laid out in stages that are manageable, affordable, and in many cases, require no expense whatsoever. There is truth to the saying, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step” and sustainable municipal planning certainly qualifies as a journey. This is your roadmap for taking your first steps with confidence.

A process outline for a municipal sustainability plan is as follows:

**1. Conduct a preliminary meeting with department heads** to discuss the following:

- A Sustainability Plan including structure, policies, processes and personnel.
- Outline goals for the first year, including scope, timeline and milestones.
- Create an environmental mission statement.
- Develop list of potential staff “green champions.”
- Conduct a basic sustainability inventory that consists of items that may already qualify as environmental improvements such as reducing energy consumption, water use, waste or miles driven; conserving or reusing resources; and encouraging healthy choices for workers, to name a few.

- Compile a listing of community strengths, weaknesses, resources, limitations, opportunities and barriers to help you identify issues of greatest concern. This will help you target your data collection, allowing you to assess how to address challenges with the resources you already have at your disposal.

**2. Develop a Sustainability Fund.** As you implement efficiency projects, you will begin saving money through conservation of energy, water and other resources. By tracking these savings as revenue and allocating them to a designated savings account, you’ll have funds available to pay for future programs.

**3. Find green champions within city government.** Send out a memo asking for volunteers in every department to initiate and implement the “greening up” of city operations. You might be surprised by how many eager responses you receive!

**4. Notify citizens through the municipality’s communication outlets that the city is “going green” and create opportunities to foster buy-in from citizens, businesses and stakeholders.** Motivate them to participate throughout the process. Your town’s sustainability plan will not result in substantive change without engaging your residents and stakeholders.

**5. Do not focus on the technical such as the built environment, infrastructure or transportation to the exclusion of the human element.** Efforts to meet objectives can be thwarted by confusion, apathy or lack of engagement from

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## Relevant Terms

### Sustainability

Meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) or Sustainable developments are those which fulfill present and future needs (WECD, 1987) while [only] using and not harming renewable resources and unique human-environmental systems of a site: [air], water, land, energy, and human ecology and/or those of other [off-site] sustainable systems (Rosenbaum 1993 and Viera 1993).

### Green House Gases (GHG)

A gas composed of molecules that absorb and reradiate infrared electromagnetic radiation. When present in the atmosphere, therefore, the gas contributes to the greenhouse effect. On Earth, the principal greenhouse gases are carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, ozone, water vapor, and certain halocarbon compounds. (encyclopedia.com)

### Mitigation vs. Adaptation

Climate mitigation is any action taken to permanently eliminate or reduce the long-term risk and hazards of climate change to human life and/or property. The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) defines mitigation as: "An anthropogenic intervention to reduce the sources or enhance the sinks of greenhouse gases."

Climate adaptation refers to the ability of a system to adjust to climate change (including climate variability and extremes) to moderate potential damage, to take advantage of opportunities, or to cope with the consequences. The IPCC defines adaptation as the, "adjustment in natural or human systems to a new or changing environment. Adaptation to climate change refers to adjustment in natural or human systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli or their effects, which moderates harm or exploits beneficial opportunities. Various types of adaptation can be distinguished, including anticipatory and reactive adapta-

tion, private and public adaptation, and autonomous and planned adaptation."

### ESCO - Energy Service Company

An energy service company (acronym: ESCO or ESCo) is a professional business providing a broad range of comprehensive energy solutions including designs and implementation of energy savings projects, energy conservation, energy infrastructure outsourcing, power generation and energy supply, and risk management. The ESCO performs an in-depth analysis of the property, designs an energy efficient solution, installs the required elements, and maintains the system to ensure energy savings during the payback period [National Association of Energy Service Providers (NAESCO) 10 Mar. 2008] The savings in energy costs is often used to pay back the capital investment of the project over a five- to 20-year period, or reinvested into the building to allow for capital upgrades that may otherwise be unfeasible. If the project does not provide returns on the investment, the ESCO is often responsible to pay the difference. [What is Energy Performance Contracting?" Energy Services Coalition. 6 Dec. 2004].

### The Natural Step

Developed in the 1980's by Dr. Karl-Henrik Robèrt, a Swedish doctor and cancer scientist, The Natural Step framework builds on a basic understanding of what makes life possible, how our biosphere functions and how we are part of the earth's natural systems. Rather than get lost in abstract definitions and causes, it builds on a platform of basic science and is designed to allow true interdisciplinary, cross sector cooperation for concrete and measurable change towards sustainability. Communities, as the building blocks of society, play an essential role in addressing the challenge of sustainability.

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citizens, staff and key stakeholders. Consider staff, business owners and citizens as an asset and resource.

**6. Conduct a special outreach to local green leaders** such as board members and owners of green businesses, community garden members, organic farmers and such. Coordinate with your local chapter of the Sierra Club and networking organizations such as EcoTuesday. Members of your community may surprise you with their knowledge and most are willing to share it with their city pro bono.

**7. Reach out to surrounding communities, the county and regional planning councils and related agencies.** Cities often suffer from the silo effect and know very little or even nothing of what is going on a few miles down the road. Speak-

ing from experience, local governments want to share information and collaborate on challenges when it comes to sustainability. In addition, climate change issues do not end at the city or county line. Many solutions must be developed regionally such as adaptation to sea level rise.

**8. Pass a Resolution to become a "Green Government."** Find out what green certifications are available. In Florida, for instance, the Florida Green Building Coalition (FGBC) has a Green Local Government Certification. The designation standards are available from the FGBC website at: [www.FloridaGreenBuilding.org/local-governments](http://www.FloridaGreenBuilding.org/local-governments).

**9. Educate yourself on the various organizations that help local governments develop sustainability plans,** many of which offer free or minimal cost assistance, such as Climate

Communities, Intergovernmental Council on Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI), Sierra Club's Cool Cities, Global Green and Sustainable Government. Each program is different and one or the other may be best for your community.

**10. Although the built environment including development and transportation are a priority for many local governments, balance your approach with the principles of "The Natural Step": people, the environment and the economy.**

**11. Create a Green Advisory Task Force made up of staff and citizens.** Assign a city liaison if this is not already required. When making up the task force, include representation from groups that are more affected by climate change such as the elderly, low-income residents, farmers, coastal residents or teachers. Please don't use this opportunity for political alliances; rather, appoint those who are the most qualified.

- Recommend the task force to research best practices of other communities both in the area and out of state with similar geography, size, demographics, etc.
- Have the task force develop a matrix approach with recommendations ranging from no/low cost to high cost and easy to implement to more complex. Some recommendations that are higher in cost or somewhat difficult to implement may have other value such as public relations or grant qualifying.

**12. Contact local colleges and universities for interns for projects.** Develop these contacts for future projects such as conducting your baseline GHG inventory.

**13. Integrate sustainability criteria into procurement policies.** Purchasing decisions are made as a reflection of an organization's core values. Setting a procedural procurement standard will ensure that your community's green values are reflected throughout its supply chain. Additionally, identifying purchasing patterns can provide insight into inefficient processes. Your state procurement office may offer easy access to information. For instance, the Florida Department of Management Services has the Climate-Friendly Products List, which contains over 6,600 products that current state term contract vendors have indicated meet one or more of the Florida-approved green product labels or standards.

**14. Hire an ESCO.** ESCOs conduct performance-based energy/operating reduction contracting and also develop finance strategies that allow the cost of building improvements to be paid for out of the savings that they generate. For example, after contracting with an ESCO, the City of Wilkes-Barre, PA will pay off the original loan amount plus interest in full in 15 years with the annual energy savings. After that, the savings will go right to the bottom line.

**15. Focus on areas land development regulations** that promote and possibly reward those who achieve sustainable standards or goals. Develop sustainable building code enhancements.

**16. Continually report actions and progress to the community.**

## Empowering Local Government - Climate Change Report

The Empowering Local Government - Climate Action report developed by Climate Communities and ICLEI provides a five page basic starting blueprint. For more information on Climate Communities and ICLEI see: [www.icleiusa.org](http://www.icleiusa.org) and [www.climatecommunities.us](http://www.climatecommunities.us).

Cool Cities document, Green Buildings for Cool Cities: A Guide for Advocating for Local Green Building Policies provides the first steps regarding buildings. The operation, heating and cooling of buildings contribute nearly 40 percent of global warming emissions and consume over 70 percent of electricity use in the United States.


SustainLane Government is an online sustainability best practices knowledge base for state and local government. With over 300 participating cities, states and counties, its information is free to government professionals and their consultants, SustainLane Government also provides a searchable network of sustainability managers, experts and practitioners, enabling government entities, large and small, to work more efficiently toward sustainable policies and practices.



**17. As you learn, educate decision makers on sustainability criteria.** Not only is sustainability new to many, it continually evolves.

**18. Engage the private sector to work towards a sustainable local economy.**

**19. Continually create opportunities to foster buy-in from citizens** and motivate them to participate throughout the process. Your Sustainability Plan will not result in substantive change without engaging your residents.

Be assured that you have picked the low hanging fruit, saved money and are moving forward to the next step of your plan with a firm foundation and a secure knowledge base from where you can hire a consultant to develop more complex mitigation recommendations, energy saving methods and/or implement climate change adaptation programs. By implementing these first steps, you will be well on your way to a successful Sustainability Plan for your city. 

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