Defying the Odds: Sustainability in Small and Rural Places

A briefing paper from the ICMA Center for Sustainable Communities



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In the wake of Hurricane Sandy, many people have heard about potential plans to spend billions on a flood barrier to protect New York City. But few will have heard about the sea walls already under construction in Homer, Alaska to deal with the increased coastal erosion expected with sea level rise. Many people know about the green roofs of Chicago, but few realize that the small towns Columbus, Wisconsin, Kearney, Nebraska, and West Liberty, Iowa have already purchased plug-in hybrid or all electric vehicles.

Most Americans have heard about the sustainability successes of the biggest American cities. While important, such news does not tell the whole story. Most Americans live in cities and towns, which face political, fiscal, technical, and jurisdictional challenges when they seek to protect the environment. While the likes of New York, Boston, Chicago, and Seattle have the money, expertise, and regional power base to implement large-scale sustainability programs, thousands of small cities and rural towns struggle to protect the environment.

This briefing paper offers short case studies and lessons derived from a minority of small communities who made strides protecting the environment despite the odds against them. First, using the data from the 2010 ICMA sustainability survey,[1] we describe the problem—that smaller and poorer municipalities are less likely to enact sustainability policies. In this section, we also describe the kinds of actions small municipalities undertake. Small cities and rural places are at a distinct disadvantage when trying to enact sustainability policies due to capacity (staff time, local revenue) and they depend more on citizen leadership.[2] Next, we present seven brief case studies of municipalities that defied the odds and implemented various sustainability policies. We conclude with lessons about the actions local leaders in these places took and their motivations. A number of themes emerge including the role of sustainability in promoting local economic competitiveness and community revitalization, the benefits of regulation and municipal utilities in promoting change, entrepreneurial leadership from local officials, and the importance of regional networks for information exchange.

Sustainability in Small Places

The 2010 ICMA survey asked local leaders to identify which sustainability activities had been enacted in their community. Policy adoption options were quite detailed covering 109 policies in 12 categories, which included water quality protection, recycling and solid waste disposal, energy use in buildings, land conservation, and building and land use regulations. The most common sustainability policies adopted by small communities are given in Table 1.

A total of 1,844 municipalities (non-counties) responded to the survey and we calculated an average adoption score (weighted by category) for each. Figure 1 clearly illustrates that smaller places adopt significantly fewer sustainability policies than larger ones. The smallest municipalities, fewer than 5,000 in population, adopted about one-third the number of the policies adopted by localities with over 100,000 residents.

We added a number of governmental and socio-economic variables to the survey data in order to statistically examine which factors related to higher or lower rates of sustainability policy adoption.[3] In many smaller places the limiting factor in terms of any policymaking, including sustainability programs, is often capacity. We found that places that raise less tax revenue per capita have lower adoption scores. Professional management (both in the form of a city/town manager and the specific dedication of staff time to sustainability) increased the adoption of sustainability policies. State government and multistate regional networks promote local action on sustainability. The role of citizens is important in small towns, and local governments that created an official citizen commission to oversee sustainability

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Table 1 Top 20 sustainability policies of places with fewer than 25,000 people *(Source: Homsy & Warner, ICMA 2012 Yearbook)*

Sustainability policy	Municipalities adopting
1. Community-wide recycling for residents	75%
2. Government office recycling	67%
3. Biking and walking trails	57%
4. Energy audits of government buildings	55%
5. Requiring sidewalks in new developments	52%
6. Supporting a local farmers market	51%
7. Recycling household hazardous waste	48%
8. High-efficiency lighting in government facilities	47%
9. Recycling of household electronic waste	45%
10. Community-wide recycling for businesses	44%
11. Tree preservation and planting program	42%
12. Heating and cooling upgrades in government facilities	38%
13. Use water pricing to encourage conservation	38%
14. Purchased fuel-efficient vehicles	33%
15. Community-wide collection of compost material	33%
16. Zoning codes to encourage more mixed-use projects	32%
17. Actions to protect quality of aquifers	32%
18. Installed high-efficiency traffic lights	30%
19. Set limits of impervious surfaces on private property	30%
20. Co-locate recycling with trash containers in public spaces	30%

actions adopted more policies. Growing communities also enacted more sustainability policies. Municipalities that grew 18 percent or more enacted twice as many policies as those that grew three percent or less. Educational attainment of the residents, as measured by those with a bachelor's degree or more, also positively correlated with more sustainable communities.

Unlikely Innovators

The statistical analysis described above paints a picture of the kind of community that would act on sustainability issues. They tend to be larger, growing in population, and richer in tax revenue with more professional staff and a better educated, more involved populace. Reading about such typically green places is interesting. However, for this briefing paper, we thought it more illustrative to examine those municipalities that did not fit the mold of innovators, yet still enacted strong environmental policies. In these places, we interviewed local officials and reviewed various planning, policy, web, and other documents. From these case studies of unlikely innovators, we can learn about the motivations and challenges small communities face.

Columbus, Wisconsin *(2010 population 4,991)*

Columbus, Wisconsin's shift toward sustainability was intentional. For a long time, local economic growth had been fairly flat. In 2007, when Boyd Kraemer (now retired) came on board as city administrator, he was charged with turning the city around. However, Wisconsin limits the kinds of economic development tools that local governments can use to attract companies. So Kraemer took a different approach. The city received a $40,000 sustainability grant from a regional energy wholesaler and he used it to fund a new position that had the dual responsibilities of boosting economic development and sustainability. He hired Steve Sobiek.

Sobiek says that while other economic development professionals were dismissing sustainability, he went around and tried "to create a marketing persona for the City of Columbus as a green community, a sustainable community." The city received grants to convert all of the street lights to high-efficiency LED fixtures—one of the first in the nation to do so. When it came time to repave the municipal parking lots, they added electric car plug-in stations. With other grant money, they purchased hybrid electric vehicles. Kraemer says that, in every purchase the city makes, it now considers its green reputation in all purchases and operations. "Need new computers? Are they energy smart? Need a new vehicle? Can you buy a hybrid? We just put new pumps at the pool that save 30 to 40 percent more energy."

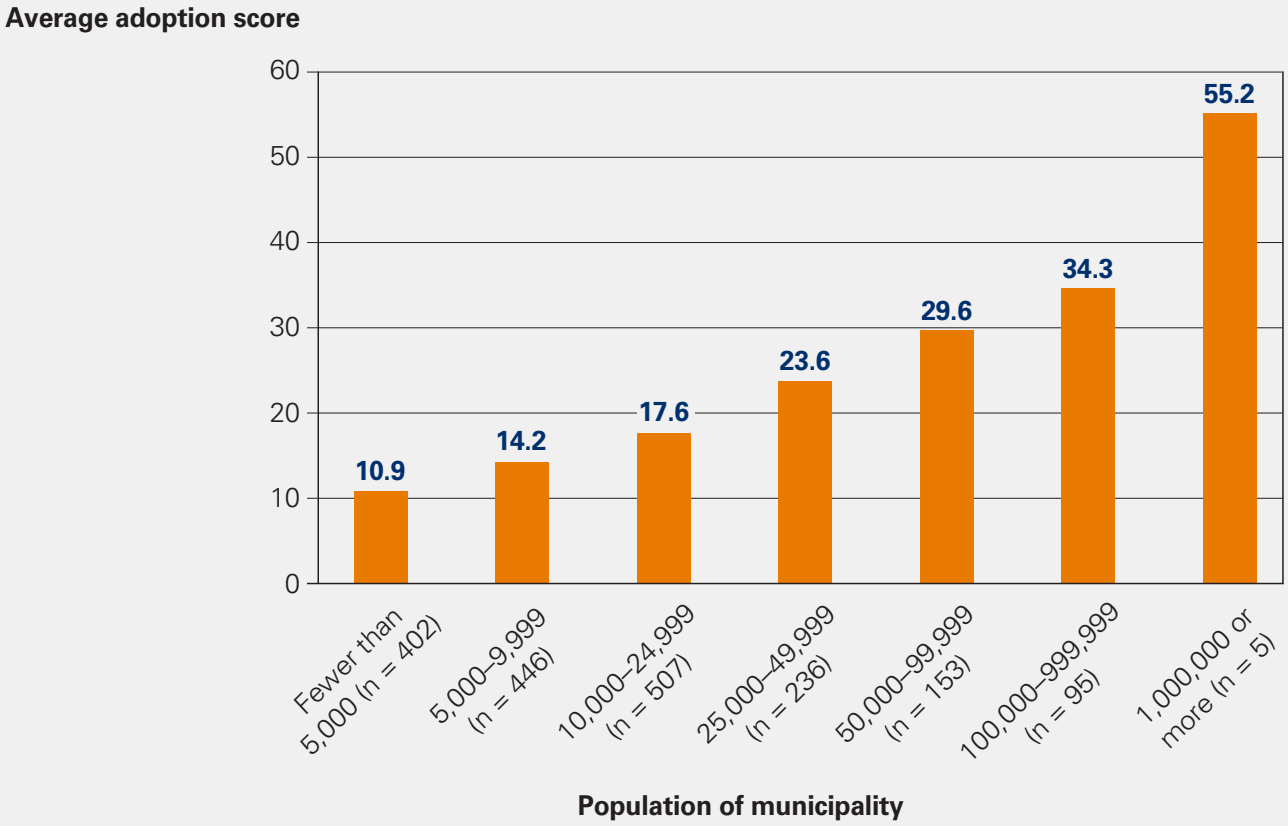
The city has compiled an aggressive list of sustainability successes including:

- Energy efficiency upgrades of the public works department, water & light department, senior center, police station, fire department, scout cabin, city hall and library; and
- Sponsoring an annual energy fair on the first Saturday in October to educate residents on energy efficiency strategies and renewable power options.

Through its municipally-owned utility, the city also:

- Gives homeowners $250 toward the cost of a home energy audit and improvement plan;
- Exchanges quartz lamp torchieres for new high-efficient floor lamps
- Rewards residents $100 for the purchase of the highest efficiency washers
- Offers up to $50 towards the cost of purchasing deciduous trees to be planted near homes and

Figure 1 Average rates of sustainability policy adoption by population size *(Source: ICMA 2012 Yearbook)*



other buildings to reduce air conditioning needs during the summer

- Rewards residents $25 towards the professional cleaning and tuning of central air conditioning systems

Articles about these programs appeared in statewide economic development and construction magazines and those generated a lot of economic development leads for Sobiek to follow. In the twelve months leading up to the fall of 2012, the city saw about $30 million dollars in capital investment including a new housing development, an assisted living center, and the expansion of a packaging operation. An arts incubator chose Columbus over Madison and a local pump manufacturer has broken ground on a larger facility that will anchor a new business park.

Columbus has many traits that make it desirable: it lies less than 30 miles from the state capital and it is right on the highway. But many communities in the region share those benefits. Indeed, former city administrator Kraemer estimates that 50 percent of his community's recent success is attributable to its sustainability marketing program. People are impressed, Kraemer reports, when they hear that the city has all high-efficiency LED street lights. "We can turn them on with a laptop and we can change them in high crime areas." He says it gives them a media and attitude edge over other communities.

The City of Columbus' electric truck parked at a plug-in station. The truck will be used for park maintenance and public works functions. Photo courtesy of the City of Columbus.

The city's 2013 Economic Development/Sustainability Report finds that the city has reduced electricity usage by 15.4 percent from 2007–2012. Much of this was due to the 2011 conversion of street lights to LED, which decreased street light energy usage 49 percent. Efficiency upgrades to the wastewater treatment plan, scheduled for spring of 2014, will save an estimated $18,000 a year in electricity costs.

Columbus, Wisconsin Resources

- **Office of Economic Development and Environmental Sustainability:** http://www.cityofcolumbuswi.com/CityDepts/EconDev/EcoDev.asp
- **Monthly Economic Development/ Sustainability** Reports can be found at: http://www.cityofcolumbuswi.com/minutes/minutes.asp

Kearney, Nebraska *(2010 population 30,787)*

Rising fuel prices sparked experiments with sustainability in this rural city located in central Nebraska along I-80. "Our budget took a substantial hit several years ago as gas prices rose, so that was really the impetus," says assistant city manager Suzanne Brodine, who also serves as development director. She describes Kearney as a fiscally conservative community. "While our citizens do support sustainable measures, they do not want to see their taxes raised to pay for it." The 2012 city newsletter boasts of the fifth consecutive year with no property tax increase.

Brodine says the first vehicle they replaced was a full-size pickup truck in the parks department with an electric vehicle and it "was a huge cost savings." The economics are not so positive for their planned replacement of a car used by their city inspectors with an all-electric Nissan Leaf. However, she says, with the long-term price of fuel expected to rise, it will at least be budget neutral, especially since the new vehicles can share a charging station. "Then, if that goes well," Brodine says, "we may look to other departments or other vehicles."

In addition to purchasing electric vehicles, they have changed every traffic light to high-efficiency fixtures and are in the process of converting every streetlight. They have conducted energy audits of every municipal building and followed up with major weatherization, HVAC, and lighting improvements

Energy audits were conducted on every municipal building in Kearney, Nebraska, including its City Hall. Photo courtesy of Ammodramus/ Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain.

that resulted in "big savings." Their zoning code now emphasizes smaller lots and walkability in order to reduce car trips.

Municipal operations have cut paper usage as much as possible, especially in terms of the information packets sent out to citizen board members. "For one particular board," Brodine says, "we're saving thousands of dollars a year in the cost for printing to get the packet out to those board members. And that's one board." Kearney has 18 citizen boards and commissions.

Brodine credits the city's membership in the Nebraska Clean Cities Coalition as inspiration for some of the sustainability policies and programs enacted in Kearney. The regional coalition seeks to build public-private partnerships to develop alternative fuel solutions for stakeholders in Nebraska. Membership in the group also makes cities eligible for federal and other funding opportunities.

Once the city council decided to move towards sustainability, Brodine says the council-manager form of government made it easy for the city to implement policies. One important reason that elected officials felt compelled to commit to environmental protection

had to do with economic development and the technology companies that the city actively recruits. Brodine explains that sustainability is very important to these companies. "They want to see what kind of things we're doing as a city and as a community to work on sustainability. We want to make sure that that's very, very visible." She says that efforts have paid off with some small companies making investments, while a much bigger software development firm has moved a lot of their operations back from India to Kearney. The city is also one of two finalists for a major data center.

South Daytona, Florida *(2010 population 12,252)*

South Daytona, only three square miles in size, is a small city that acts big in terms of sustainability. Two major challenges lie in the city's future as described by its 2011 sustainability plan—the potential for a 6.5 foot rise in sea level due to climate change and the risk to its drinking water supply as the regional population continues to grow. The city has moved aggressively to mitigate these threats. Much of the effort was spearheaded by a former mayor who came back from a statewide League of Cities conference fired up about sustainability.

South Daytona has instituted water conservation programs and has, in its sustainability plan, set the stage for additional efforts. In one program, the city buys millions of gallons per day of reclaimed sewage water from a neighboring municipality, which also provides water and sewage service. Although not suitable for drinking, the reclaimed water has been highly treated, but then was just dumped into the Atlantic Ocean. Now, South Daytona pipes it throughout the municipality for use by residential and business customers for landscape irrigation. Property owners pay for the service (including connection fees) just as they would a water utility. Such a centralized system of grey water re-use is becoming increasingly common in Florida.

At the same time the city seeks to reduce the amount of water that goes to the wastewater plant in the first place. Forty percent of home water use is flushed down the toilet. In 2009, the city started offering a $50 rebate for replacement of toilets installed before 1991 with ultra-low flush models. (After 1991, all toilets were required to use just 1.6 gallons per flush.) The rebate applies to both residences and businesses for up to two toilets per unit and the refund comes out of the city's general funds. (Another Florida city that modeled their toilet replacement program on the one in South Daytona uses money from a specific water and wastewater operating fund for the rebates.) South Daytona is also investigating better education of residents about water conservation strategies, imposition of permanent water restrictions, and options to incentivize low-impact development. (See low impact development box.)

The city also made a major commitment to fighting climate change. In 2009, the city completed a greenhouse gas emissions inventory for its own operations as well as for the community at large. The city adopted a goal of reducing emissions 25 percent from 2008 levels by 2031. So far, the city has focused on energy conservation in municipal facilities by changing to more efficient lighting, installing a solar water heater in the fire department, and educating staff about energy usage. The city also replaced parking lot lights with more efficient fixtures and found other lights that can be turned off completely without compromising safety. In the near future, the city is looking into providing low interest loans for energy improvements, offering free trees to property owners to increase the canopy, and replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy in the electricity purchased by the city.

The sustainability plan recommends a series of simple metrics to track progress in each of these areas. Much of this data is collected; however, local officials report that the city lacks the staff capacity to compile and analyze much of the information. They also say that they miss valuable educational opportunities that such usage data offers, and the ability to report on program progress.

Low Impact Development Toolkits

Low Impact Development (LID) seeks to use natural processes to manage stormwater within residential and commercial developments. It seeks to reframe stormwater as a resource rather than a nuisance or waste product. Properly designed LID projects reduce or eliminate the need for expensive water management infrastructure including larger stormwater pipes, storage facilities, and treatment plants. Instead the practices emphasize biorention facilities, rain gardens, green roofs, rain barrels and permeable pavements—all meant to mimic the natural movement of water into the ground. The US Environmental Protection Agency has extensive resources on LID best practices at: http://water.epa.gov/polwaste/green

South Daytona, Florida Resources

- **Sustainability Plan:** http://www.southdaytona.org/egov/documents/13204181921340.pdf
- **Reclaimed Water Program:** http://www.southdaytona.org/egov/apps/document/center.egov?view=item;id=1105
- **Toilet Rebate Program:** http://www.southdaytona.org/eGov/apps/document/center.egov?view=item;id=974

Homer, Alaska *(2010 population 5,003)*

Sustainability as a governing priority came early to Homer, a rural city with an economy built around tourism and natural resources. After attending a state climate change conference in 2006, the mayor realized that the city faces a greater threat from climate change then other places due to its location in the upper latitudes. He immediately convened a Global Warming Task Force to examine ways to reduce greenhouse gas emissions throughout the community and to prepare the city for the inevitable changes. Already, the current city manager, Walt Wrede, says they are seeing variations in their environment that they attribute to climate change. "We're concerned that we are definitely seeing changes in the climate, more frequent storms and pests, like the spruce bark beetle that haven't happened for many years, but are devastating forests around here."

The city drafted a climate change plan in 2007 that created a baseline inventory of emissions and set a goal of a 20 percent reduction in emissions (from 2000 levels) by 2020. The city was one of the first in the nation to make sustainability a mandatory part of orientation for municipal employees. New city workers receive a 13-page energy policy guide titled "Money, Energy, and Sustainability" that emphasizes the importance reducing waste in general and energy usage in particular. Other municipalities use it as a model to include in their new employee training programs.

An aerial view of Homer Spit and the harbor in Homer, Alaska, where city officials have developed a plan to mitigate risks associated with climate change. Photo courtesy of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers/Public Domain.

The city also established a revolving Energy Fund to provide the financial resources for municipal departments to finance environmental improvements. The fund was capitalized in 2010 with over $300,000 taken from thirteen different departmental depreciation accounts. Every project must have an Energy Conservation Plan and the savings in energy costs are used to repay the fund. Projects financed by the fund have, in one case, saved the city $150,000 per year by using high efficiency lighting in its harbor facilities and, in another, reduced energy costs at the sewage treatment plan by 20 percent. The money was also used to conduct energy audits and upgrades of 16 municipal buildings.

The city's 2011 economic development plan specifically addresses both the potential positive and negative economic impacts of the changing climate. While sea level rise and pests threaten some industries, the potential for a longer growing season may open opportunities. In a chapter titled "The Bigger World," the economic development plan seeks to position Homer economically and environmentally in a global context. It recommends appointing a local food commission to increase local agricultural production and consumption; implementing "Smart Growth" land use and transportation policies to reduce the reliance on cars; supporting programs to improve energy efficiency in homes and businesses; and developing renewable energy sources. The city has applied for a grant to study tidal power. There is also an emphasis on other areas that are crucial to comprehensive sustainability including affordable housing and quality of life.

Another area of concern outlined in the economic development plan is the commercial and sport fishing industry. The local fishery is sustainably managed with catch limits set to ensure stocks are maintained from year to year. The city also focuses efforts on reducing water pollution, mitigating acidification, and working to ensure the fish do not fall prey to disease. The attention by the business community to these issues surprised city manager Wrede. "Our economic development commission is pretty darn green. They're pushing things like sustainable agriculture and your farmer's markets and farming and buying local and eating local organic produce is a really big deal here. It was started out as a philosophy but now it's becoming a major part of the economy."

Homer, Alaska Resources

- **Orientation guide for municipal employees titled "Money, Energy, and Sustainability":** http://www.cityofhomer-ak.gov/sites/default/files/fileattachments/employee_sustainibility_policy_guide.pdf
- **Revolving Energy Fund:** http://www.cityofhomer-ak.gov/sites/default/files/fileattachments/ordinance_10-14.pdf
- **Detail energy audits of municipal buildings:** http://www.cityofhomer-ak.gov/sites/default/files/fileattachments/city_of_homer_detailed_energy_audit_100_final_01-20-11.pdf

Sleepy Eye, Minnesota Resources

- **Minnesota League of Cities Sustainability website:** http://www.lmc.org/page/1/sustainability-issue.jsp
- **Minnesota GreenStep Cities:** http://www.cleanenergyresourceteams.org/greenstep
- **Central Minnesota Municipal Power Authority:** http://cmmpa.org/

Sleepy Eye, Minnesota *(2010 population 3,599)*

Sleepy Eye is a rural city of only two square miles in southern Minnesota. Its aggressive sustainability effort can be traced to its ownership of a municipal utility and the state regulations governing the operation of the public power company. The state requires all utilities, including public ones, to reinvest in conservation and has set a goal of reducing energy consumption by 20 percent by 2025. Sleepy Eye also faces a requirement that they purchase 25 percent of their electricity from eligible renewable sources, such as solar, wind, landfill gas, biomass, hydroelectric, hydrogen, and anaerobic digestion. While sustainability is a strong ethic in the city, Sleepy Eye's power manager admits, "I'll be honest. If we weren't required to do this, we wouldn't be this aggressive." At the same time, the power manager says that he must be careful because he has low-income customers who find paying even a little bit more for electricity a hardship.

In addition to participating in a state program that provides rebates for energy efficient appliance purchases, Sleepy Eye reached out to its industrial customers. Several manufacturers in the city use a lot of compressed air, which takes a lot of energy to produce. The municipal utility, through the Central Minnesota Municipal Power Agency, offers rebates for companies to undertake a study of compressed air systems. In order to qualify for the rebate, which could cover up to half of the study's cost, the company must repair 75 percent of the identified leaks within nine months. The regional agency also has a rebate program, which incentivizes the installation of newer and more efficient motors, pumps, and other electrical drives. In this way, the city links sustainability to economic revitalization. The city is often introduced to additional best management practices through its participation in the League of Minnesota Cities, which is helping them set up a process to audit energy use in public buildings.

In Sleepy Eye, city manager Mark Kober says the conservation ethic sparked by the need to reduce power consumption has spilled over into water conservation. "Frankly," he reports, "that's been a little easier than electricity." He says that the municipality has established a pricing structure for water "so now it's a real penalty if you waste it." The city also reported it has a recycling program for the community and government offices, a land conservation program, and a tree preservation/planting policy.

West Liberty, Iowa *(2010 population 3,736)*

West Liberty is a rural city in eastern Iowa about midway between Iowa City and Muscatine. West Liberty Foods employs almost 1,000 workers processing up to 425 million pounds of turkey, pork, beef, and chicken products per year, and is the major employer in town. The company is owned by a collaborative of turkey farmers who purchased the plant in 1996 when Kraft Foods announced it was closing its doors. The city is the first majority minority city in Iowa with 52 percent of the population describing themselves as Hispanic or Latino, nearly all of Mexican descent. West Liberty has the lowest per capita income of any community in our sample ($16,502, US Census 2010). How does a lower income community justify sustainability investments?

The city power company owns a natural gas/diesel generator to provide peak power when needed. Upgrading the generators to reduce greenhouse gas emissions as required by federal regulations is expensive. For example, the installation of a catalytic converter on one of the generators costs about $150,000. Still, city manager Ward says, the operation makes enough money that the city can invest in energy conservation

An event taking place in West Liberty, Iowa, where changing street lights to high efficiency fixtures has saved the city 47% in energy costs. Photo courtesy of the City of West Liberty.

and efficiency projects. Most recently, they purchased a Chevrolet Volt (a plug-in hybrid) from the local dealer for use as the city manager's car. Changing street lights to high efficiency fixtures has saved them 47 percent in energy costs.

The local government also pays attention to its water resources. The city owns a sewer vacuum truck that uses recycled water for cleaning out sewage lines. Also, a $2 million upgrade to the water plant will transition the process from a three decades old chemical treatment system to one that uses electricity to charge particles in the water and draw them out by using 2000 magnets. Ward boasts, "Instead of adding chemicals, we're actually removing chemicals." Such an energy intensive process is possible because they own their own utility.

Ward says the community seeks state and federal grants, but will not shape their sustainability efforts just to get the funding. "I used to be an economic developer many years ago. I've been on many projects where you try to mold a project just to go after a grant… [but], we're not going to change the scope of a project we're doing for our community just to fit in line with what the state would like to see." He says if the federal or state governments can help them with a project that is a local priority, then they will accept the aid. Otherwise, if it is important enough, the municipality will pursue it on its own. "Either way we're going to be fine."

This attitude means that Ward has to be creative. For example, the purchase of the Chevrolet Volt required a resourceful negotiation with the dealership to justify purchasing a $40,000 car. "What happened was we purchased it and we got $10,000 on a trade-in… and then there was the question of that tax credit. As a city, you know, we can't use tax credits… So I called the IRS, was put on hold and transferred for over an hour and a half by five different people. Finally, I learned that while the city can't keep that tax credit of $7,500 for an alternative fueled vehicle, the dealer can get it. So he adds another $7,500 on the trade-in to the city. All of sudden, a $40,000 car became $23,500."

Hurricane, Utah *(2010 population 13,748)*

The threat of climate change does not carry much weight with the city manager of Hurricane, who believes that the danger is overstated. Still, Clark Fawcett is a strong believer in environmental sustainability. "As far as being more efficient and using energy so we have more to go around in order to be sustainable for the future, then I believe that's a good thing to be involved with." He admits that the city's ownership of a municipal utility, and the threat of future state or federal renewable energy requirements, has pushed Hurricane to start to purchase wind power.

One program in Hurricane is the home energy analysis tool, which allows power customers to regularly check energy usage on the internet. At the same time, the monitoring system compares a customer's use to other customers around the city who live in homes of similar sizes and ages. Customers can see whether they use more or less energy than others and research indicates that such comparisons can result in a one to two percent reduction in energy consumption.[4] The city contracts with a third party, Enerlyte of Draper, Utah, to compile the utility data. (House details, such as size and age, come from the assessor's office.) Enerlyte sets up a webpage specifically for Hurricane and its power customers. The website also provides tips to encourage conservation actions.

The city manager says that the regional power association, Utah Associated Municipal Power Systems (UAMPS), hosts meetings which are attended by the director of Hurricane's power department and are an important source of energy conservation practices. The society, which has 45 community-owned power systems as members throughout the Intermountain West, also purchases low cost power for its members. Hurricane participates in its Home Energy Savings program, which offers cash incentives to customers who purchase energy saving appliances or lighting fixtures. This builds local interest and helps ensure access to lower income families where energy savings can help reduce the stress on family budgets.

Conclusion and Lessons

A number of factors come together to make the communities profiled here innovators in sustainability. All have entrepreneurial leaders - either elected officials or professional managers and staff who drive green policy making. These creative leaders reshape regional and global issues to fit local agendas and local circumstance. Usually, they reframe environmental issues in terms of cost savings or increased efficiency, which can be an important way to broaden the appeal of green policies to officials and constituents that do not prioritize such issues.

The municipalities described in this issue brief also started with the easiest strategies that make the most sense in their community. Energy audits, weatherization of public buildings, changing street lights, and purchase of alternative fueled vehicles can have very large long- and short-term fiscal benefits. For example, in Kearney, Nebraska, replacing a gas guzzling pickup truck with an electric car showcased the economic and environmental benefits of green policies in a big way. This should make it easier to accept other changes in which the payback will take longer. Obvious projects with quick payoffs will still get people into the mode of thinking more comprehensively and over the longer term about sustainability.

Education of staff and the public is important. For programs to have impact over time, they must be institutionalized. The leaders interviewed here recommend that starting with new hires is a good place to begin sustainability training as changing the habits of long-term employees is more difficult. In these cases, think of ways to make sustainable behavior easy, such as providing recycling bins in every office, installing motion-activated light switches to turn off lights in unoccupied rooms, and using automatic thermostats to control temperatures, especially after hours. Changes in the community may take longer, but leaders in these municipalities found innovative ways to use incentives to encourage conservation among local residents and businesses. Financial savings are an important driver of public action.

Entrepreneurial leaders do not act alone. Local and regional networks are important for public officials, especially for small town leaders. Such regional relationships took numerous forms: state-sponsored environmental coalitions, formal networks of local governments, informal networks of neighboring municipalities, regional utility organizations, and power suppliers. These regional networks are sources of sustainability inspiration, best practices, grant funding/administration, and political support. Municipalities that decide to work together within a region towards economic and environmental goals may find more success than individual efforts. Such programs are also more likely to be of interest to funders.

Municipalities that own their own utility have access to technical staff and financial resources that help overcome the capacity problems that hamper implementation in other small communities. Municipal utilities are motivated by regulation from higher levels of government, and have revenue that can be used to support energy conservation or water protection. Utility staff also learn about sustainability best practices through their own associations or as part of the regulations or incentives promulgated by states or the federal government. Utilities can be key players in both compelling action and enabling it.

The sustainability actions in these communities make clear that environmental protection and economic development are not in conflict. Many communities use sustainability policies as a way to give their community a competitive edge, which attracts jobs to the communities. In addition, these local governments can help provide cost saving strategies and efficiencies to the businesses within their borders. In the same way, local residents, especially those with lower incomes, can benefit from the extensive energy saving programs offered by the municipalities, which can reduce overall housing costs and boost quality of life in poor neighborhoods.

Small and rural places, whether acting alone or as part of a regional network, can make important contributions to sustainability—and do it in a way that is a net positive for the local economy. Such a realization is important since so many people and so much land is encompassed by small cities and rural towns. Local governments face challenges, especially in terms of fiscal capacity and technical expertise. But, small places actually may have an advantage over big cities. Columbus, Wisconsin city manager Kraemer says that the nearby state capital has more eco-friendly students and many more resources, but they do not get enough done because they have to deal with a much larger bureaucracy. “You’ve got to make it easy to get things done. If you get tied up in committees and studies and consultants, it doesn’t last.” So while big cities boast of their green successes, the unlikely innovators described in this issue brief demonstrate that there are ways for smaller municipalities to push forward. Small and rural places may face many challenges, but they also have the advantage of agility.

Key Takeaways

- Entrepreneurial leadership makes a difference, especially in small communities.
- It is important to show early benefits to build support for sustainability efforts.
- Educate local staff and the public; they can be a force for change over time.
- Regional networks are critical for information exchange and learning best practices.
- Municipal utilities are key partners – they have expertise, investment capability, and regulatory incentives to play a leadership role.
- Sustainability can be a competitive economic development strategy—one that promotes social inclusion and community revitalization.

Endnotes

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3 Homsy, G.C. and M.E. Warner (2013) The Limits of Local Sustainability Policy: Challenges for Polycentricity. Working Paper (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University)

4 For example, see Ayres, I., Raseman, S., and Shih, A. (2009) "Evidence from Two Large Field Experiments that Peer Comparison Feedback can Reduce Residential Energy Usage." Working Paper (#15386), National Bureau of Economic Research. http://www.nber.org/papers/w15386.

Defying the Odds: Sustainability in Small and Rural Places

A briefing paper from the ICMA Center for Sustainable Communities

Acknowledgements: Research on the case studies presented in this paper was made possible in part with funding from the USDA National Institute for Food and Agriculture grant # 2011-68006-30793.

This report was researched and written by ICMA, through a subcontract agreement with NADO Research Foundation. NADO Research Foundation provided overall guidance and project direction. The work that provided the basis for this publication was supported by funding under an award with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The substance and findings of the work are dedicated to the public. The author and publisher are solely responsible for the accuracy of the statements and interpretations contained in this publication. Such interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views of the Government.

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Founded in 1914, ICMA, the International City/County Management Association, advances professional local government worldwide. Our mission and vision is to create excellence in local governance by developing and fostering professional management to build sustainable communities that improve people's lives worldwide. ICMA provides member support; publications; data and information; peer and results-oriented assistance; and training and professional development to city, town, and county experts and other individuals and organizations throughout the world. The management decisions made by ICMA's members affect millions of individuals living in thousands of communities, from small villages and towns to large metropolitan areas.

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The National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) is a national membership organization for the national network of over 520 regional development organizations (RDOs) focused on strengthening local governments, communities, and economies through regional strategies, partnerships, and solutions. Founded in 1988, the NADO Research Foundation is the nonprofit research affiliate of NADO. The NADO Research Foundation identifies, studies, and promotes regional solutions and approaches to improving local prosperity and services through the nationwide network of RDOs. The Research Foundation shares best practices and offers professional development training, analyzes the impact of federal policies and programs on RDOs and their local communities, and examines the latest developments and trends in small metropolitan and rural America. Most importantly, the Research Foundation is helping bridge the communications gap among practitioners, researchers, and policymakers.

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