

Diary of a Sustainability PLAN

By Jamie Kidwell



Taking Problem-Solving CONVERSATIONS to the Next Level

2nd Annual Green Communities Conference
October 28, 2011

Last December, over 70 local government and university representatives from across the state gathered at the League's Capital Office to discuss opportunities for and barriers to community environmental initiatives. The first annual Michigan Green Communities Conference demonstrated the interest from cities, townships, villages, counties and universities in working together to make Michigan a more sustainable state.

On October 28, the second annual Michigan Green Communities Conference will once again present communities with the opportunity to engage in peer learning and resource sharing to foster innovation. The Conference will include presentations from community and state leaders and breakout sessions to take problem-solving conversations to the next level for specific sustainability challenges.

Ann Arbor has a reputation as a leader and innovator in sustainability. It was the first city in the U.S. to convert its streetlights to LED, the new Justice Center is LEED certified, the city has a green fleet policy, it has a 5,000 solar roofs initiative and a solar-powered farmers market, its citizens champion green practices (such as the Greenbelt, an innovative land preservation program funded by voter-approved millage—a 30 year, 0.5 mil tax levy), the mayor hosts a green fair, and on and on. With all of these projects, Ann Arbor continues to demonstrate its commitment to sustainability, but with over 25 sustainability plans in place, the city lacks a cohesive approach.

Ann Arbor's city council adopted 10 environmental goals in 2007, that provided a foundation for building a sustainability framework. Ann Arbor used to have 14 different departments, and each department developed its own plans. Though the city recently reorganized into four key service areas, city plans often still represent the silo planning of the past. The challenge is how to make these plans work towards the same goals.

My job is to synthesize all 25 plans and create a sustainability framework. Analysis will show where different plan goals converge or conflict—for instance, how does the solar plan interact with the urban forestry management plan? And, Ann Arbor has an energy plan, but it was a council resolution that set forth the goal of 30 percent renewable energy by 2010, not the energy plan. How do these resolutions, from both council and commission, fit into the sustainability framework?

February 2011

To commence building this sustainability framework, I started by reading all 20 (at that time) departmental sustainability plans. As part of the initial phase, I am working to conduct a content analysis of these plans that aims to get at the root of a content and context issue. The key questions are: Do city plans refer to one another? How often do terms occur within different plans? Do city plans use these terms in a consistent way? For example: This simply touches the surface of plan

TERM	PLAN THAT MENTIONS TERM	FREQUENCY OF TERM
Corridor	Transportation Plan	305
	Downtown Plan	14
	Natural Features Master Plan	13
	Non-Motorized Plan	57

content. For instance, the Natural Features Master Plan uses "corridor" to denote stream and wildlife corridors, which is different from the Non-Motorized Plan's use of "corridor" to refer to street and road corridors.

March - May 2011

I am conducting interviews with more than 25 staff members. A component of the interviews is to raise awareness about this project and the city's sustainability goals. I think plan content analysis contributes to this effort by raising staff awareness of plan interactions. Typically, a city plan addresses a single theme or area of need, and a single staff or group of staff drafts and executes this plan. Our content analysis will be a simple way of quantifying the lack or presence of interaction between

10 Environmental Goals

Clean Air

Eliminate air toxins, criteria pollutants, and persistent bioaccumulative toxins

Clean Water

Ensure safe water for drinking, recreation, other uses, and other species

Efficient Mobility

Provide infrastructure and policies for efficient modes of transportation

Health-Promoting Urban Environment

Ensure that the built environment promotes public health and improvements to the natural environment

Local Food Sufficiency

Conserve, protect, and restore local agriculture and aquaculture resources

Responsible Resource Use

Produce zero waste

Safe Community

Eliminate damage to public health and property from natural and other hazards

Stable Climate

Eliminate net greenhouse gas emissions and other destabilizing climate impacts

Sustainable Energy

Use 100 percent renewable energy

Viable Ecosystems

Conserve, protect, and restore aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems

certain plans. Quantifying this disconnect will identify further the need for an overarching framework at the staff level.

June 2011

The interview process led to the creation of executive summaries for each of the 25 city plans. In working with city staff to complete one-page summaries for each plan, the diversity of the plans (in both content and structure) became more apparent. For instance, some plans use the term “objective” to refer to action items, and other plans use “recommendation” or “project.” The number of objectives in each plan also differs vastly. For example, refer to the two plans below:

Huron River and Impoundment Management Plan

8 goals, 32 objectives

Solid Waste Management Plan

11 broad goals, 5 activity areas, 39 strategies, 161 objectives


Incorporating objectives into one-page executive summaries is proving to be a great challenge. How do we produce a summary for each plan that communicates the key plan goals without losing valuable information? How do we take a plan with 161 objectives and fit it within one page?

July 2011

This project is still underway, but future plans include a joint commission meeting in this fall to bring together the city’s environmental commission, energy commission, planning commission, and park advisory commission. The purpose of this meeting is to hear feedback on a draft sustainability framework and suggestions for goal prioritization that will help guide the sustainability action plan and inform the budget. Each subsequent year, the joint commission will meet to prioritize sustainability initiatives and update the action plan.

Michigan Green Communities Measure and Report

Ann Arbor, like other municipalities in Michigan, is finding ways to further sustainability despite funding challenges. Michigan Green Communities (MGC) is a growing network that includes over 100 local governments and universities in Michigan. It builds off the Green Communities Challenge, a collaborative project of the League, the State Energy Office, the Michigan Townships Association and the Michigan Association of Counties that encourages community leaders to measure and report progress toward environmental conservation goals. It also connects Michigan to neighboring states through the Midwest Regional Sustainability Network (MRSN). Ann Arbor and Dearborn began MRSN to strengthen connections with other local governments interested in starting sustainability initiatives.

MGC’s network and the annual Green Communities Conference will continue to encourage municipalities to learn from each other’s successes and challenges to help us become more sustainable at the local, regional, and state levels. 

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(above) A solar powered parking meter in downtown Ann Arbor.
(left) Ann Arbor was the first city in the nation to convert its streetlights to LED.