

Terry Gips' Notes: GreenStep Cities Workshop, January 4th, 2017

Sustainability Commissions and GreenStep Best Practice 24: Community Engagement

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I have a sustainability consulting firm, Sustainability Associates, that works with business, government, non-profits and communities on sustainability. I've developed sustainability training, visioning and action plans for many cities and counties, including Burnsville, Mahtomedi, St. Cloud and LaCrosse.

I'm a co-founder of the nonprofit Alliance for Sustainability and served as its Executive Director. I now volunteer as the President and help Sean Gosiewski with our work with more than 40 Metro municipalities and Environment and Sustainability Commissions.

I am a founding Commissioner of the City of St. Louis Park Environment and Sustainability Commission and served as its Vice-Chair and Chair. I'm now one of two commissioners representing business.

I was an advisor for the creation of GreenStep Cities and as Phil pointed out earlier, I advocated with the Alliance for Sustainability to have this Best Practice 24 on Benchmarks and Community Engagement. I think it's really a key component for determining the ultimate success of Green Step Cities and particularly, the widespread adoption of sustainability by residents, businesses, congregations, schools and congregations in a city.

I was appointed by the St. Louis Park City Council to serve on the task force that created our Environment and Sustainability Commission in 2012. The City Council wanted to be a real leader on environment and sustainability and really gave us a blue sky to determine what was needed. We've had amazing support from the City Manager and the City Council ever since.

One of our key goals is that we did not want the commission to be a typical, somewhat moribund commission. We wanted it to be fully engaged with the community and create a dynamic, active two-way communications with residents, neighborhoods, businesses, schools and congregation.

The City Council had already signed up for GreenStep City so one of our original tasks was to fulfill it.

We wanted a structure that reached out to have a more diverse commission so we have 13 members, which is much larger than other commissions. In addition to general commissioners, we have one commissioner from multi-unit buildings, two students and two businesses. That was accepted.

In order to increase diversity, we wanted to remove as many barriers as possible to participation so we asked the City Council to cover any expenses for child care and transportation for those who needed it. Unfortunately, that request was never funded although we're still trying.

There are a number of steps that have been taken:

We have an existing staff green team drawn from various departments.

We have met, learned from and worked with all staff working in major sustainability areas. They've come into our meetings and done presentations.

We began with a part-time staff person but the City Manager advocated and worked with the City Council to approve a full-time Sustainability Coordinator, Shannon Pinc, who's been fabulous.

Name: In addition to Environment and Sustainability Commission we wanted a less formal, more inviting name: Sustainable SLP. We use both.

We borrowed from the City of Edina in creating Work Groups on diverse topics where we invite diverse citizens, business leaders and others to participate along with commissioners to broaden perspectives. This has been invaluable.

We created an annual planning process in which each work draws up annual plans and we then have a planning session for the commission as a whole. We then present our plan for the year to the City Council and other commissions.

We have sought to create a public presence, including through social media, Website and Facebook, as well as a flyer. We're also looking at a possible cable television program.

We conducted a training on Sustainability and the Natural Step Framework for all of our commissioners..

We participated in or held public educational, involvement and engagement events, including : Organic Living Conference, Earth Day Festival and a Fall Harvest Festival. We had public engagement and visioning processes at some of them.

We also participated in already existing city events, such as the Parktacular and National Night Out.

We held a well-attended Climate Resilience Forum.

We've done presentations at the St. Louis Park Business Council, which is part of the Metro West Chamber of Commerce.

We've partnered with Health in the Park, a three year, city-wide broadly-based health initiative funded by a grant from Blue Cross Blue Shield.

We've also participated in other existing city initiatives, such as Connect the Park to have safe pedestrian and bike access throughout the city.

We actively participated in the City Council's Process and Policies to Address Plastic Bags and Takeout Containers.

We applied for and were accepted by Xcel as one of its Partners in Energy. Consequently, we conducted an extensive process of recruiting our city's major energy users, including diverse businesses, education and other institutions. We then began an extensive visioning and planning process to create a sustainable energy future, which resulted in an Energy Action Plan that was adopted by the City Council.

Thanks to our city youth who were involved in iMatters and Roots and Shoots, the students created a Climate Score Card and rated the City. It presented the findings to the City Council and the result was incredibly powerful publicity and a strong commitment by the City Council to address climate change.

The City has made a commitment to developing a Climate Resilience Plan and has hired a consulting firm to carry it out with the Commission, diverse partners and residents.

The City will have an extensive upcoming visioning process as part of the Comp Planning Process. The City has hired a futurist to help with the visioning and is looking into how to better involve those who can't participate in evening or weekend public meetings or who don't use the internet or other technologies as much to dig deeper into the community and collect more input from people where they are at.

Going forward, we still need to be more actively connected to our neighborhood groups and have a better social media presence. We also hope to have a community sustainability survey.