

## Sustainability Offices for Local Governments

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### What is Sustainability?

The most widely recognized definition of sustainability is found in the 1987 Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development. It says that sustainability means “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”<sup>1</sup>



The United States’ Environmental Protection Agency also provides a definition of sustainability. The EPA says that sustainability is “a new way of thinking about an age-old concern: ensuring that our children and grandchildren inherit a tomorrow that is at least as good as today, preferably better.” Economic prosperity, environmental progress and community concerns are all parts of sustainability.<sup>2</sup>

### What is a Sustainability Office?

Many municipalities have made steps towards increased sustainability within their own governments. The first step is often the creation of a sustainability office concerned with reducing a city’s negative environmental impact, and often with the added benefit of reducing city costs. Sustainability offices throughout the nation have worked to cut energy consumption, limit harmful emissions, develop green buildings and high performance standards for city facilities, reduce waste and increase recycling, and promote renewable energy opportunities.

### What cities have benefited from a Sustainability Office?

As the concept of sustainability grows in popularity worldwide, more and more American cities are establishing sustainability offices. Among them are:

- *Cleveland, Ohio:* Cleveland established a Sustainability Program in 2005. The program has a staff of two and works with a steering committee of local environmental organizations.<sup>3</sup> So far, the office has required Energy Star compliance for new



construction, sought LEED certification for city-funded capital improvements, improved stormwater management, added more hybrids to the city bus fleet, optimized city recycling routes to almost double recycling rates, and maintained an internal paper-recycling program.<sup>4</sup>

- *Fayetteville, Arkansas:* Fayetteville has a sustainability director who has considerably cut energy costs, beginning in his first year.<sup>5</sup> One of the few small cities in America with a sustainability office, Fayetteville's Office of Sustainability is tasked with developing and implementing a Sustainability Plan for the City, including the creation of programs that promote urban sustainability and assist divisions to reduce environmental impacts of operations and improve environmental performance.<sup>6</sup>

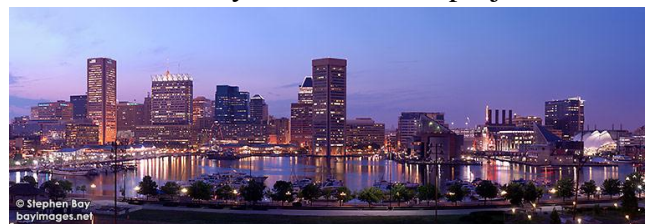
- *Minneapolis, Minnesota:* Minneapolis has two sustainability coordinators and in 2003 passed a resolution creating a Sustainability Plan. The plan used citizen input to adopt 24 progress indicators that are monitored by staff. Each city department must incorporate the indicators into its business and work plans each year.<sup>7</sup>



- *San Diego, California:* San Diego approved its Sustainable Community Program in 2002. Like Minneapolis, San Diego measures progress with specific indicators. Among these indicators are number of vehicle miles traveled, number of days exceeding air quality standards, number of transit riders, number of beach closings, and kilowatts of energy consumed.<sup>8</sup> The Sustainable Community Program oversees many events, including green youth forums, community cleanup/recycling events, free used tire recycling, backyard composting workshops, lead-safety training, residential electronics recycling, and used auto product recycling.<sup>9</sup>

- *San Francisco, California:* San Francisco's Environmental Department has issued a Strategic Plan for 2007-2009 that created many targets for increased sustainability. The Plan features sections on carbon neutrality, energy, clean air transportation, green building, urban forest, zero waste, toxics reduction, environmental justice, environmental education, and public outreach.<sup>10</sup>

- *Seattle, Washington:* Seattle has an Office of Sustainability and Environment that collaborates with City agencies, business groups, nonprofit organizations, and other partners to protect and enhance Seattle's environmental quality and livability. The Office of Sustainability and Environment issues an annual Climate Action Plan and works with the Mayor's Office on many environmental projects. These include the Green Building Task Force, the Seattle reLeaf



conservation program, the Climate Action Plan, the Urban Forest Management Plan, and the Environmental Action Agenda.<sup>11</sup>

- *Baltimore, Maryland:* Within their Department of Planning, Baltimore has an Office of Sustainability. The purpose of this office is to foster discussion on sustainability, inventory existing programs or organizations, create sustainability goals, and serve as a roadmap for future legislation, partnerships, programs, etc.<sup>12</sup> Baltimore's Office of Sustainability has worked to establish city mandated green building standards, a transit oriented development plan, a food policy task force, and a comprehensive economic development strategy.<sup>13</sup>
- *Portland, Oregon:* Portland has long had an Office of Sustainable Development, but in January 2009 took steps to bring sustainability to the forefront of their city government. Portland has merged their Bureau of Planning with the Office of Sustainable Development to create the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability. The City approved the merger in order to ensure that sustainability principles are thoroughly integrated into the core of Portland's planning, urban design and government operations.<sup>14</sup> The accomplishments of Portland's Bureau of Planning and Sustainability are substantial. Within city government, they have reduced waste and use of hazardous substances, significantly reduced energy costs, exploited solar and wind energy, added hybrid and bio-diesel vehicles to the city fleet, and changed city purchasing policy to include recycled, environmentally safe, and green materials.<sup>15</sup>

### **What other large organizations have created Sustainability Offices?**

Many large businesses are turning to sustainability plans in order to save costs and profit from going green. These sustainability officers take many titles, often mixing corporate labels (chief, vice president, etc.) with sustainability or environmental. Corporate sustainability officers wield a variety of powers; they can explore partnerships to create green products and often have the power to close deals, they are able to vote on product research and advertising campaigns, and they are responsible for environmental stewardship, corporate communications, strategic partnerships and product innovations.<sup>16</sup> Examples of companies that employ sustainability offices are:

- *LG Electronics:* LG seeks to create revenue for stakeholders and investors by means of technological developments and innovative management. The also take a broad perspective, focused on the creation of a pleasant environment by minimizing the environmental impact created by production.<sup>17</sup>
- *General Electric:* GE's Ecomagination program works on creating environmentally friendly products, but it also makes significant commitments to increase corporate efficiency and cut greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>18</sup>



Another group of large organizations, colleges and universities, are leading the way in the development of sustainability offices or officers. Many top American universities, including our own SUNY at Buffalo, have established sustainability offices. Among them are:

- *Yale University:* Yale's Office of Sustainability monitors all things green at the University. They have committed to a long-term Greenhouse Gas Reduction and Renewable Energy Strategy, developed the Yale Sustainability indices, and have created a Sustainability Leaders Program to increase faculty and staff engagement in Yale's sustainability efforts.<sup>19</sup>
- *The State University of New York at Buffalo:* The UB Green office has received national recognition as a model for sustainability offices. UB Green provides information and programs related to many environmental issues. These include, but are not limited to energy conservation, recycling, lifestyles, green power, green building design, climate change, and hazardous materials.<sup>20</sup>
- *University of Notre Dame:* Notre Dame's Office of Sustainability was established in 2008. The Office works for continual improvement in building design and operations, landscaping, procurement, energy and water consumption, waste disposal, recycling and service provision.<sup>21</sup>



### **Has the City of Buffalo instituted any sustainability programs?**

In its 2006 Comprehensive Plan, the City of Buffalo said that future development "should be sustainable, integrating economic, environmental and social concerns."<sup>22</sup> The Comprehensive Plan proposed initiatives to:

- Reduce the consumption of energy, land and other non-renewable resources.
- Minimize the waste of materials, water, and other limited resources.
- Create livable, healthy and productive environments.
- Reduce greenhouse gasses in order to assist in alleviating the impact of global climate change.<sup>23</sup>



In addition, the City of Buffalo maintains an Environmental Management Commission. The Commission was established to advise the city government on present and proposed methods and plans for the preservation, protection, enhancement and management of the environment and to encourage actions to improve environmental quality among public and private agencies and organizations within the city.<sup>24</sup>

One way the Commission fulfils this role is by producing monthly Energy, Efficiency and

Sustainability Tip Sheets. The most recent Tip Sheet, produced in March 2009, outlines the Water Council of the City of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Milwaukee's Water Council is proposing the construction of a multimillion-dollar headquarters. The headquarters would feature a research facility focused on developing new technology for cleaning, conserving, desalinating, and pumping water for human consumption. The proposal represents an innovative use of waterfront property in a rust belt city.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.epa.gov/sustainability/basicinfo.htm#sustainability>

<sup>2</sup> <http://yosemite.epa.gov/r10/oi.nsf/sustainability/sustainability/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.city.cleveland.oh.us/government/departments/pubutil/sustainability/index1.html>.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.city.cleveland.oh.us/CityofCleveland/Home/Government/CityAgencies/PublicUtilities/Sustainability?\\_piref34\\_138416\\_34\\_138357\\_138357.tabstring=Tab4](http://www.city.cleveland.oh.us/CityofCleveland/Home/Government/CityAgencies/PublicUtilities/Sustainability?_piref34_138416_34_138357_138357.tabstring=Tab4)

<sup>5</sup> <http://green-cities.wikispaces.com/file/view/Greening+Buffalo.pdf>, page 14

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.accessfayetteville.org/government/sustainability/index.cfm>

<sup>7</sup> "A hundred million little issues," SustainLane Government (March 2007)

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.sandiego.gov/environmental-services/sustainable/pdf/indicators.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.sandiego.gov/environmental-services/geninfo/calendar.shtml>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.sfenvironment.org/downloads/library/tegiplan0709comprehensive.doc>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.seattle.gov/ENVIRONMENT/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.ci.baltimore.md.us/government/planning/sustainability/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.ci.baltimore.md.us/government/planning/sustainability/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.portlandonline.com/osd/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.portlandonline.com/osd/index.cfm?c=41482>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.environmentalleader.com/2007/07/05/chief-sustainability-officers-wield-extraordinary-power/>

<sup>17</sup> [http://www.lge.com/about/sustainability/our\\_sustainability\\_vision.jsp](http://www.lge.com/about/sustainability/our_sustainability_vision.jsp)

<sup>18</sup> <http://ge.ecomagination.com/site/downloads/news/2007ecoreport.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.yale.edu/sustainability/index.html>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.ubgreenoffice.com/>

<sup>21</sup> <http://green.nd.edu/office>

<sup>22</sup> Buffalo Comprehensive Plan, Section 2.1.1. [http://www.city-buffalo.org/files/1\\_2\\_1/Mayor/COB\\_Comprehensive\\_Plan/section\\_2459290796.html#section\\_2459291231](http://www.city-buffalo.org/files/1_2_1/Mayor/COB_Comprehensive_Plan/section_2459290796.html#section_2459291231)

<sup>2</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Id.

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<sup>24</sup>[http://www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/Home/CityServices/Environmental\\_Management\\_Commission](http://www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/Home/CityServices/Environmental_Management_Commission)

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