



HOW TO BE ENGAGED WITH YOUR LOCAL GOVERNMENT ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Mark Apel

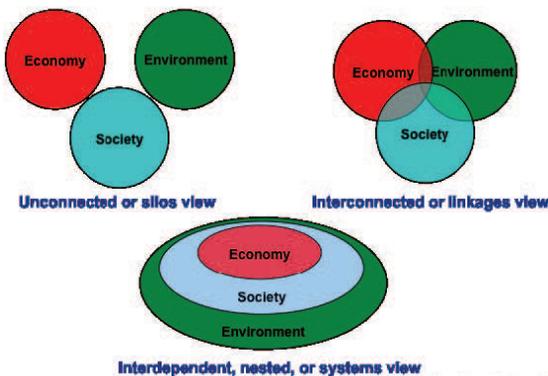
Sustainable development, defined as “meeting the needs of the present without comprising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs,”¹ is quickly becoming the new paradigm for the 21st century. This is happening, in part, as our cities and communities grow and our resources to support them become more scarce.

The National Network of Sustainable Living Educators (NNSLE), an affiliation of University, USDA and Extension educators, defines three critical components of sustainability – economic, social and environmental. Economic sustainability is defined as maintaining or increasing our standard of living without decreasing the standard of living of others. Social sustainability implies equity and fairness in the creation of vibrant community life, both locally and globally. Environmental sustainability mandates conserving and managing our ecosystems for future generations. Any sustainability solution must consider all three of these components. If not, then that solution is bound to have a negative impact on the one component that is overlooked.² Further, the task of keeping these three components in balance with one another does not end, and constantly requires attention and modification by a community.

While individuals may make conscious, life-style choices that promote sustainability, such as eating locally-grown food or driving a hybrid vehicle, the responsibility of “the greatest good for the greatest number” often rests squarely in the hands of local government. Often local government needs to be involved when dealing with issues that affect the community as a whole. At the same time, engaging with one’s local government may seem daunting and many people believe that there are invisible walls between the citizens of a community and their elected or public officials. However, our state and federal constitutions require transparency and access to government.

The challenge is in determining where the best balance of the three components of sustainability exists today for the greatest good. Another challenge is to learn how citizens can petition, influence, and support their local government to do this, or to start doing this. Of course, many are already familiar with the power of the ballot to vote someone in or out of office, based on an individual’s effectiveness or lack thereof. What’s not always as clear are the avenues available to citizens to have sway over elected and public officials between election cycles. In many communities it is this influence done between elections that can have the longer lasting and more effective change.

Evolving Views



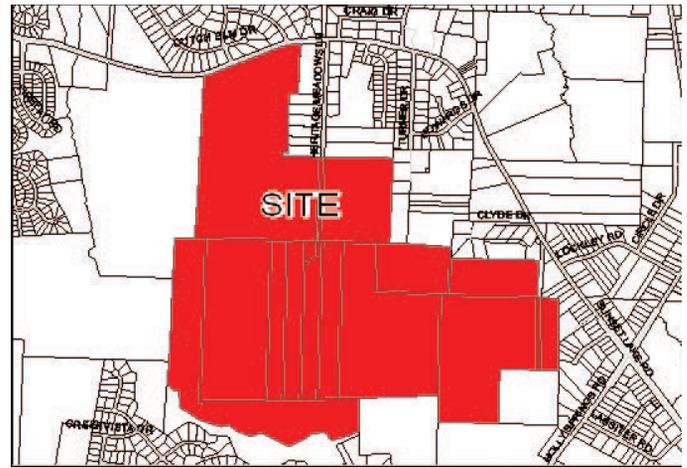
Graphic courtesy Viviane Simon-Brown, Oregon State



Your Local Government

Depending on your form of local government—county, city, or town—there will always be elected officials that preside as a community’s governing body. In Arizona this body is in the form of a board of supervisors, if you reside in a county, or a council if you live in the incorporated limits of a city or town. These boards and councils oversee the affairs of the community such as budgets, personnel, purchases, ordinances, and policy. In addition to a governing body, staff members for local government also play an important role in local policy and programming. Typically, communities also have commissions or committees comprised of citizens appointed by the elected officials to oversee specific community issues such as planning and zoning, utility rates, environmental issues, architectural design, or airports, among others. Generally, these commissions or committees serve in an advisory capacity that make recommendations to the governing body for a final decision. Some commissions may actually be granted final decision-making authority by their respective board or council.

Before you can engage with your local government, you will need to find out when, where and how often they meet. This is important because these are the opportunities for citizens to share their opinions or ideas at these meetings. Often, a city or county’s website will have information about all of their boards and commissions. If not, then a simple call to city hall or your county government should get you the information you need about their meeting times. In Arizona, these bodies are subject to the “sunshine” or open meeting laws, referring to the degree of transparency that is required of their meetings—such as public notice of the meetings, posted agendas, minutes of the meeting, accommodations for members of the public with disabilities, and opportunities for the public to speak before the governing body. This type of information is typically publicized online, in the newspaper, and/or on television.



Communicating with Local Officials

All meetings, other than executive sessions, are “public meetings” meaning they are open to the public to watch their officials deliberate, but not necessarily open for public comment. The opportunity to speak before a board, commission or committee usually comes in two forms – a call to the public and a public hearing. The call to the public is the opportunity for any member of the public to speak on any topic they wish that is not on the agenda for that particular meeting. In Arizona, it’s generally not appropriate (and sometimes illegal) for a member of the body to respond to anyone during the call to the public, since the topic was not posted on an agenda beforehand, thereby denying citizens interested in that topic adequate notice. However, community officials (paid staff) moderating the meetings should take note of any pertinent comments and topics for follow-up and possible discussion at future meetings. The other opportunity for the public to speak at these meetings will be on agenda topics designated as “public hearings” that, by state law or local ordinance, are required to invite public input. Planning and zoning issues or plan/ordinance changes are common topics requiring public hearings, since the decision made by a governing body will likely directly affect part or all of the community.

You may take advantage of the opportunities for public comment as an individual or on behalf of a like-minded group. Petitions are a common way for citizens to demonstrate group support of particular grievances or a new idea in a public forum. When speaking before elected officials or citizen commissions in meetings or hearings, it is important to make your comments as clear and concise as possible. Think carefully about what you plan to say and write it down ahead of time, if necessary. Before the public hearing or meeting, request a copy of existing sustainability policies of your local government or a copy of the community’s comprehensive or general plan—a document that commonly provides a community the opportunity to articulate sustainability principles and policies.

In some cases, you may have the opportunity to share slides, photos, or other visual aids, so inquire ahead of time



about such possibilities if you are interested. Be careful to stay within the time allotment provided and speak respectfully to officials, regardless of the nature of the issue. Avoid being overly critical or berating past actions. Try to focus your comments on current situations and ideas for solutions. Also be sure not to repeat comments that have already been given. Make sure statements made are true and can be verified. Do not be emotional, but focus on the facts. Cite your sources (use footnotes or attach a copy or summary). When doing research do not use just any “study.” There are valid studies, i.e. peer-reviewed, unbiased, etc. and there are not such good studies.

Sharing your thoughts and opinions in public meetings and forums can demonstrate to decision-makers the importance of an issue to their constituents. These are the opportunities for citizens to suggest to their elected-officials policy changes that would require more rigorous review of land use decisions, policy changes, or procurement practices as they relate to a variety of sustainability issues, such as greenhouse gas emissions; green-building; public transportation; or energy and water conservation. Talking one-on-one with elected officials and municipal staff can be just as effective. Meeting with them, or emailing or calling them with simple ideas are great ways to start. Picking one or several easy ideas for your local government to implement can build momentum. For example, convincing your local officials that they could require compact fluorescent bulbs in all of their government buildings because it will save them money and reduce their carbon footprint can begin setting the wheels in motion for bigger ideas. Sometimes, a personal chat with the mayor, or city manager, or public works director is all it takes. A government’s community development or planning director is also often willing to be personally engaged in discussions about sustainability, since they are charged with developing and updating a community’s comprehensive or general plan. Other times, using a public forum to air an idea, as discussed previously and where the media is present, may be more effective.

Local Government Sustainability Plans

There are many ways that local governments are addressing climate change, energy and resource conservation and the creation of livable communities. Several communities across the country are rising to the challenge with innovative, ambitious, and far-reaching initiatives and efforts. Several communities, such as New York, NY (www.nyc.gov/html/planyc2030/html/emissions/emissions.shtml) have conducted greenhouse gas inventories, identifying the sources and concentrations of emissions and creating baselines against which to measure future inventories.

The City of Portland and Multnomah County in Oregon have jointly committed to reducing their carbon emissions by 40% by 2030 through their Climate Action Plan 2009 (www.portlandonline.com/bps/). Local governments can strive to meet such goals by targeting the categories of buildings and energy; land use and mobility; consumption and solid waste;

food and agriculture. These are all areas where the governing bodies directly affect policy, regulations, land use, taxation, public works, or have the ability to pursue public outreach programs

Some communities are creating their own carbon offset or carbon reduction investment programs. Aspen, Colorado was the first city in the United States to create such a program with the Canary Tags program. Canary Tags (www.aspenzgreen.com/offsets) represent investments in local energy conservation and renewable energy projects and can be purchased by visitors, residents, businesses, and events.

In Arizona, the City of Tucson’s Office of Conservation and Sustainable Development was one of the first in the country to establish a separate office to ensure that sustainability remains a key focus in its city’s programs and operations. Pima County has a voluntary green-building program for both residential and commercial developers. The City of Flagstaff’s Sustainability Commission is in the process of drafting a Community Sustainability Plan focusing on the following issues: Resource Conservation, Quality of Life, Waste Prevention and Climate Management. With many examples available, it is increasingly easier for local governments to develop their own plans.

Local governments can create education and green certification programs for residents, businesses, homes, or special events. They can network with other communities through organizations like Local Governments for Sustainability (www.iclei.org). In cases where communities are served by municipal utilities, local governments can have a major impact on investments in efficient technology and renewable energy. Local governments can also encourage policies to address energy and resource conservation at the state and federal levels.



Conclusion

For communities and governments that are not yet as engaged in addressing sustainable development as these and similar communities, citizens can serve as the catalyst for change. Becoming familiar with what is already being done in U.S. cities is a good place to find ideas for what might work in your community. Engagement may be an incremental process of suggesting positive, well-reasoned policy changes to public officials.

The perceived invisible barriers between citizens and their public officials can easily be dissolved with thoughtful engagement. Few issues are as important as a community's efforts to become more sustainable and there are many ways to engage your local government. It may be helpful to remember that elected and public officials work for the public. You help pay their salaries. You don't have to be a scientist or expert to have valuable ideas and concerns about resource and energy conservation to share with your local government. Government cannot represent the people if it does not hear from the people, so do not be afraid to speak up and share your thoughts.

Reference

- 1 Bruntland, G. (ed.). 1987. "Our common future: The World Commission on Environment and Development." Oxford, United Kingdom. Oxford University Press.
- 2 Crosby, G., C. Elliot, L. Hyde, L. McDonell, M. Monroe, D. Rashash, W. Sheftall, V. Simon-Brown, T. Worthley, and L. Tupas. A vision for relevance. National Extension Directors and Administrators Meeting. February 2008. San Diego, CA. Available at: <http://www.jcep.org/resources/NNSLEwhitepaper.pdf>



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THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE AND LIFE SCIENCES
TUCSON, ARIZONA 85721

MARK APEL
Area Agent, Cochise County Cooperative Extension

CONTACT:
TOM DEGOMEZ
degomez@cals.arizona.edu

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