

Sustainable Connections: Linking Sustainability and Economic Development Strategies

Sustainability is a fundamental component of building a strong community, not only in terms of the physical environment, but also for economic prosperity. Although the nexus between sustainability and economic development may not always be apparent and will certainly vary from place to place, local officials across the country are providing leadership and advancing economic strategies that incorporate environmental stewardship. In addition to a healthier environment for citizens, the benefits of greener economic development include cost savings through effective and efficient use of resources, less reliance on unsustainable energy sources and new jobs and economic investment¹.

This guide highlights the sustainability efforts of four cities, Denver, Boston, Chattanooga, Tenn., and Grand Rapids, Mich., used to spur economic growth and the strategies they are pursuing.

Understanding the intricacies of strategies connecting sustainability and economic development provides insights into how others may begin this process in their community. What was the catalyst or moment that made the city leaders realize that these two issue areas are interrelated? What were the challenges of incorporating “green” practices into an economic development plan? Who was involved? What major economic development initiatives have benefitted from a focus on sustainability? And what is some pertinent advice for other cities that might look to take similar steps?

The four cities profiled here made a commitment to sustainability and are now integrating sustainability principles into local economic development activities, even though they all approach sustainable economic development in different ways. The Denver example focuses on encouraging green business practices; Boston on supporting green industry sectors; Chattanooga on quality of life; and Grand Rapids on business attraction through sustainability initiatives. There is no one-size-fits-all solution; however each example shows how city

Strategies for connecting economic development and sustainability principles:

- Build on community assets
- Be patient
- Plan consistently
- Obtain commitment from the community
- Involve the business community and other relevant stakeholders

¹ For more information about sustainability efforts that support economic growth, please see NLC’s publication “Sustainable Connections: Strategies to Support Local Economies.”

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leadership provided the impetus for further action. Additionally, building on community assets, being patient, consistent planning and having an overall commitment from the community and all relevant stakeholders proved to be common elements of economic development strategies that effectively connect with sustainability principles.

Denver, Colorado

Population: 610,345

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Through the Denver Small Business Energy Program, the Environmental Health staff installed compact fluorescent lights on the marquee of the Bluebird Theater, which is now using 73% less energy.

Denver was one of the first U.S. cities to embrace the concept of sustainable economic development. According to Andre Pettigrew, former director of economic development, “Greenprint Denver started as an idea based on social responsibility but evolved into much more.”

In 2005, then-Mayor John W. Hickenlooper joined an initial group of 50 mayors nationwide in a pledge to reduce the environmental impact and carbon footprint of their cities when he signed the U.S. Mayors Climate Protection Agreement. This initial push established what would begin a city-wide commitment to environmental stewardship, economic prosperity and social responsibility.

The city’s commitment to sustainability solidified when Mayor Hickenlooper announced that the 2008 Democratic National Convention (DNC), which the city was hosting, would be the “greenest” DNC ever and committed to integrating sustainability initiatives into the planning and execution of the event. This proclamation forced city leaders to rethink city policies and programs in order to meet the mayor’s challenge.

Community greening efforts associated with the DNC were centralized within the Greenprint Denver Office, which was established in 2007 by executive order and housed in the mayor’s office. Teams were created to accomplish goals for the DNC, including a Convention Business Team charged with greening area businesses.

The Convention Business Team was dedicated to creating buy-in from the business community by working with establishments that would be most impacted by the convention: hotels, restaurants, event planners, caterers, venue managers and other related small businesses. Businesses participating with the team’s measures benefited from increased visibility and marketing as the city’s vendors of choice for the DNC. The end result was the opportunity for the city to highlight businesses in the area that were committed to sustainability, to increase the demand for those businesses’ products and in turn reduce the impact of the convention by encouraging visitors to make environmentally friendly choices.



One of the goals of the Convention Business Team was to “create a legacy that will support sustainable business practices after the Convention.” Denver’s experience with the DNC demonstrated to area businesses that sustainable practices were not only good for the community, but also good for business. As a result the city was able to make a more seamless transition into green economic development practices once the convention ended.

Since the convention, Greenprint Denver has expanded to become the centralized agency that oversees, implements, tracks and measures sustainability initiatives of the various city agencies. According to Scott Morrissey, deputy director of Greenprint Denver, “it is a dispersed model that functions on two levels — high-level direction setting and project implementation support — which has allowed the city to really focus on breaking down silos and leveraging the work of multiple agencies.” Accomplishments include an expanded green vehicle fleet, green building standards, sustainable waste management strategies, water conservation and project tracking through an ISO 14001-certified Environmental Management System.

Greenprint Denver has also vastly changed the way the city thinks about economic development initiatives. Over time, several agencies have embedded Greenprint Denver into all of its programs, from business development to workforce training.

One example of this nexus is the Small Business Energy program, run out of the Department of Environmental Health, which provides education, financial assistance and technical support services to businesses looking to incorporate energy efficiency initiatives into business practices. By registering for the program, businesses are assigned an energy advisor to consult about green business choices. Businesses have reported significant cost savings resulting from improved energy efficiency.

Following the experience from the DNC, ongoing buy-in from the business community has been built on the firsthand experience of business owners who recognize that sustainable measures are good for business success. Denver has consistently promoted green business practices as a long term cost-savings matter: if you conserve water, take advantage of recycling and reduce electricity usage, your business will save money over the long term.

Even though Denver has accomplished much in this area, it hasn’t always been easy. “Being able to convene all relevant stakeholders and find a message that works with each audience has been really tough” said Morrissey. “But the city made this commitment and it has been important all along to continue to work with all relevant stakeholders in order to accomplish our ultimate goals to be a truly sustainable community.”

Words of Wisdom

“Conduct a realistic analysis of what your city has to offer and make sure you understand what stakeholders care about. Build relationships, have conversations and make sure that you talk to stakeholders on a level that works for them.”

--Scott Morrissey, Deputy Director, Greenprint Denver



Boston, Massachusetts

Population: 625,304

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Over the past 20 years, the City of Boston has gone through numerous shifts in how it has approached sustainability and economic development. While both environmentalism and economic development have been a priority, at various points one has taken a back seat to the other.

Prior to 2006, internal governance structures separated the issues of economic development and sustainability with environmental and energy related work operating out of the mayor's office, and economic development programs based within the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA). While both agencies separately tried to link sustainability and economic development, lack of a common language around the issues and organizational disconnects across city agencies proved difficult in developing firm linkages.

A catalytic moment for green economic development in Boston came with the creation of the Mayor's Green Building Taskforce in 2003 and passage of a Green Building Policy in 2007. The taskforce brought together industry professionals and building experts to explore the benefits, overcome challenges and promote opportunities for green building. Through this initial, deliberative process local leaders, business interests and sustainability advocates started not only a conversation, but discovered common ground and in that, a plan forward. Despite early challenges, the city has demonstrated committed leadership and a policy culture supportive of connecting sustainability with economic development. Ongoing cooperative efforts to link these issues by the Boston Redevelopment Authority in partnership with the city are proving successful.

Boston's efforts around green economic development are designed to capitalize on the region's assets and strengths. The Green Tech Initiative, created in 2008, focuses on enhancing the city's growing clean technology sector by helping existing companies and entrepreneurs expand while attracting outside clean technology businesses to the area.

With its network of highly educated individuals and innovative companies, Boston is an attractive region for clean technology businesses to locate. Additionally, the city's progressive policies on issues such as green building and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and programs like the city's Sustainable Business Leader Program, which helps small to mid-size businesses leaders green their business practices, make Boston a natural fit for clean tech industries.

As part of the GreenTech Initiative, BRA provides clean technology businesses interested in locating in Boston with assistance in site selection, hiring, workforce training, competitive financial incentives and navigating the city's business permitting and licensing process. Additionally the city is supporting the next generation of clean technology companies by offering networking opportunities for entrepreneurs and an incubator network for companies with similar industries and supply chains.

The focus on clean technology companies is proving a smart move for the region. Despite a recession that has adversely affected many industries nationwide, the clean technology sector in Boston is thriving. This success, even during the height of the recent economic recession, has made an impression on city leaders. During a June 2010 roundtable, clean-tech executives announced that while other industries in the area were cutting back, they were expanding operations and hiring new workers. BRA estimates that, while not solely attributable to green jobs, the city will recover all jobs lost during the recent recession by 2013.



Although the city has seen success with its Green Tech Initiative, a general lack of understanding about the growing clean technology industry has been particularly challenging for the city to overcome. “Typically, economic development has been about deals and job creation whereas the field of sustainability focuses on energy and climate change. Increasingly, as energy prices rise and markets react to a range of sustainability metrics and pressures, decision makers and opinion leaders are realizing the two fields are highly inter-related, and that going forward, all businesses will have to adapt to a low carbon economy regardless of industry” said Galen Nelson, green tech business manager for the Boston Redevelopment Authority.

Words of Wisdom

“Invest in clean technology – job creation opportunities exist and are very versatile. It is one of the only industries where the products and services can positively impact all other industries.”

--Galen Nelson, Green Tech Business Manager, Boston Redevelopment Authority

Chattanooga, Tennessee

Population: 169,243

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Over the past 30 years, Chattanooga has gone from being a city that was once on the brink of total collapse to one that is now vibrant, economically strong, environmentally sound and with a quality of life that is not easily duplicated. “This truly is an example of both deliberate, careful planning and spontaneous action,” according to David Crockett of the Sustainability and Planning Office.

In 1969, Walter Cronkite in his evening news report referred to Chattanooga as the dirtiest city in America. The rate of respiratory illness was eight times the national average; it’s been said that the particulate was so bad that traveling salesmen brought extra shirts to change into after being outside for an extended period of time. Reports say that the mountains could not be seen in the distance because of the constant smog that covered the city.

In addition to Chattanooga’s terrible air quality, rising national housing prices and the 1970s oil crisis severely strained the city’s already declining manufacturing base, which included many foundries that served the appliance and automotive industries, as well as many others. The city also experienced major urban deterioration as people followed the national trend of abandoning traditional downtown retailers in favor of suburban shopping options. People were leaving the city, industries were withering, businesses were closing; the city was dying. These drastic conditions made community action an absolute necessity.

Citizens, business leaders and elected officials banded together to tackle the problem and only a few years later, the city met or exceeded all national air quality standards. This early city-wide commitment to environmentalism has inspired a focus on sustainability as a key strategy for redevelopment and revitalization. Years later, Chattanooga boasts one of the most extensive greenway systems that link public spaces throughout the city such as the waterfront park with recreation options like the Tennessee Aquarium and accessible transportation like the city’s electric bus system.



The city has also paid close attention to linking sustainability with business development activities. Multi-national companies such as Alstom and Volkswagen have large operations in Chattanooga and were ultimately attracted to the city, not only because of its business environment but also, in part, because of the city's history of environmental stewardship.

For instance, Volkswagen's \$1 billion automotive assembly facility is built upon a brownfield and former military facility once used to manufacture TNT. The plant site required significant environmental remediation prior to development. During remediation, the city designated nearly half of the 6,000-acre site as a nature preserve in order to conserve green spaces, create parklands and protect a rare plant indigenous to the area. An important determining factor for Volkswagen was that Chattanooga's clear commitment to sustainability matched the company's corporate culture.

In addition to incorporating sustainable land use practices at the site, many of the company's production processes have also been altered in order to minimize harmful effects on the environment. Volkswagen and the City of Chattanooga hope that this plant will become the greenest auto assembly plant in the United States and will also provide much needed jobs as the country recovers from recession. With future expansions and the potential impact from automotive suppliers, experts suggest that the total jobs created could eventually exceed 11,000.

This partnership is proof that there is a way for a city to achieve economic growth and prosperity through sustainability. But no one said it was easy. Many Chattanooga leaders who have been around since Cronkite's dismal portrayal recognize the challenges that came with making a commitment to being environmentally conscious before "going green" was popular. According to Crockett, "These initiatives took a lot of political cover, city leaders really needed to have guts to convince the community that this was a good idea. We needed to involve citizens. We had to involve the business community and the Chamber [of Commerce]. But in the end we knew it was something good and that if we were going to develop our idea, we had better make sure the end result was world class."

While Chattanooga's strategy will not translate into every community, the principles behind it are universal. Chattanooga benefited from long-term leadership and a strong commitment to sustainability from the community. The city's focus on creating a better quality of life for its citizens in turn created a community where businesses are eager to locate.

Words of Wisdom

"Make your city the best it can be for the people who currently live there and the rest will follow suit. By following this motto, Chattanooga has become the most transformed city in America"

--Ron Littlefield, Mayor, City of Chattanooga, Tenn.



Grand Rapids, Michigan

Population: 193,242

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Initial commitments to sustainability efforts in Grand Rapids were made under the leadership of Mayor George Heartwell, a national advocate for environmentalism and sustainability. Unsatisfied with the level of federal and state leadership on the issues, the mayor decided to lead by example at the local level. Upon taking office in 2005, the mayor discarded the city's strategic plan and formed the Community Sustainability Partnership (CSP), an independent partnership of major city stakeholders to develop a Sustainability Plan based on a triple bottom line approach to serve as the city's overall strategic plan.

Last year the city adopted the updated Sustainability Plan, which connects Grand Rapids' current sustainability initiatives with the goals of different city departments and incorporates ways to measure success. Through the plan, initiatives are tracked and measured qualitatively and quantitatively by the Office of Energy and Sustainability. As part of this work, the Office is directly responsible for monitoring and reporting on the city's energy efficiency, renewable energy, and climate related initiatives. The checks and balances provided in the Sustainability Plan ensure that initiatives not only impact the environmental health but also the economic growth and social equity of the community.

Through the economic initiatives laid out in the Sustainability Plan, Grand Rapids' Office of Energy and Sustainability works with the Economic Development Department to attract and retain businesses from green industries, spur investment from clean technologies, and advocate for businesses to implement sustainable business practices.

One successful business attraction strategy for Grand Rapids has been the U.S. Green Building Council's LEED certification program to promote green buildings. City leaders have advocated for the development of LEED certified buildings as a means to increase energy efficiency and reduce operating expenses for public and private buildings. While the city has been reluctant to specifically mandate green building policies, most developers have realized the benefits and have voluntarily incorporated green building practices into their projects. Grand Rapids currently has the most LEED certified buildings per capita and the fifth most LEED certified buildings overall in the country.

Grand Rapids has used its recent successes in green building development and ambitious community-wide sustainability initiatives to entice new development and new businesses. The business community's attitude has generally been favorable to the local government's efforts, because many have been on the cutting edge of sustainability efforts for some time. In fact, according to Eric DeLong, deputy city manager, "The city has also seen increased business attraction and expansion because of the availability of LEED certified buildings, and existing businesses have been interested in acquiring LEED standards."



Grand Rapids, Mich. has found economic benefits as a result of the city's strong commitment to sustainability efforts. Pictured are a few of the city's LEED certified green buildings.



Grand Rapids' success in many ways can be attributed to a unique combination of strong political leadership and engaged community involvement. Mayor Heartwell is unequivocal in his support for the time and effort his staff, other stakeholders and community members have devoted to making his vision for a more sustainable Grand Rapids a reality. "By embedding economic, environmental, and social elements into the fabric of our efforts, we ensure longevity and the sustainability of our community and organization," states Mayor Heartwell. "At the same time, we are able to continue to provide the most efficient and effective services to our citizens by using a sustainable model of service delivery," he says.

Words of Wisdom

"It's OK to start with an imperfect plan because that's how a solid plan will develop – through lessons learned. We are planning our way to excellence."

--Eric Delong, Deputy City Manager, City of Grand Rapids, Mich.

About This Publication

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