

OCL Study Session
Sustainability: The Big Picture
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Presenters: Peter Arsenault, architect and GreeningUSA board of directors; Diane Brandli, interior designer, professor, and VP, GreeningUSA; David Coburn, director, Onondaga County Office of the Environment

“Sustainability’s time has come. It’s a perfect storm and only getting stronger.” (Peter Arsenault)

Triple bottom line that defines sustainable activities in a community:

- **Environmental**—Focusing on the natural environment and ecology of local area
- **Social**—People issue, population growth. We’re becoming more and more urban; how socially equitable are we going to be?
- **Economy**—Movement from a local to a global economy

Sustainable advancements benefit all three areas.

What is sustainability? Living in a way that meets current needs without compromising the needs of future generations (or, in the Iroquois tradition, living in a way that considers the needs of the 7th generation to come).

How do we shift from business-as-usual to something that’s sustainable for future generations? Think globally, act locally. The actions of individual communities impact the entire county, which in turn impacts state and national efforts.

Twelve traits of a sustainable community

1. **Government leadership**—The political will to move in a sustainable direction, do something a little different. In many cities, mayors have stepped in where national leadership has faltered.
 - **Scottsdale Arizona**—First city in the country to pass ordinance requiring that all city buildings be gold certified by the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) green building rating system. Particularly significant because buildings are a big part of the greenhouse gas problem.
 - **What about Onondaga County?** Some “sustainability” initiatives have been under way for 10 years but not referred to as such. Currently we’re pursuing sustainability measures more deliberately, but they’re still in infancy stages. County passed greenhouse gas reduction resolution designed to find ways of reducing our carbon

footprint. Also signed state's Climate Smart pledge. Created Environmental Sustainability Advisory Committee.

2. **Diversified Economic Development**—In order to sustain economy, must be based on diverse sources, plugging into new industries.
 - **Stapleton, Denver, Colo.**—When community decided to relocate local airport away from residential development, they used the vacated space to develop new town center, putting residents within walking distance of all their needs (groceries, shopping, etc.). Also created different housing types. Pilot LEED neighborhood development project. Focused on more than simple economic development. Addressed multiple needs of residents and community, creating a win-win economic development project.
 - **What about Onondaga County?** Growing awareness that economic development must be tied to sustainability efforts. Economic development office has representation on the sustainability committee. County uses tax credits to encourage the construction of new LEED certified buildings throughout the county. The credit reduces property taxes for qualifying projects, and the amount of the credit increases as the level of LEED certification increases.
3. **Land Use Planning and Resource Management**—Integrated, balanced and diversified. Post-WWII communities were planned for cars. Today, “new urbanism” encourages mixed-use development, accessible neighborhoods, walkable communities, and a variety of housing types.
 - **Celebration, Florida**—Holistic approach to community. Residents can walk or bike to work, promoting good health, exercise and social outlets. Town center, parks and green spaces also promote sense of community.
 - **Eco-Village, Ithaca**—Dense cluster of housing surrounded by green spaces. 80 percent developed, 20 percent green spaces—water, forests, fields. Community garden, communal meals, strong social networks.
 - **What about Onondaga County?** Onondaga County Planning Agency promotes smart development through the 2010 development plan. Provides a framework for growth. Encourages sustainability and compact development, conservation of natural resources, restraint to infrastructure sprawl. Onondaga County Planning Federation encourages smart growth concepts at town and village level. Agricultural districts support and protect land for agricultural use.
4. **Transportation and Parking with Numerous Options**—Although communities and cities in past were built and planned around cars, many residents today would prefer riding bikes, walking, or taking public transit. More cities are looking at alternative transportation options, such as light

rail. But requires a change in thinking—an openness to using buses, for instance.

- **San Francisco**—Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) once looked at skeptically; now city can't run enough trains for the demand. Mass transit comebacks also in cities like Washington, DC, and NYC. People today want mass transit. San Francisco also offers cable cars and buses. Trains are most eco-friendly of all public transit options.
- **What about Onondaga County?** County relies on Syracuse Metropolitan Transit Authority and Centro for transportation planning. Centro offers some good options, ie., services for disabled, bike racks, growing fleet of natural gas buses. County offers pre-tax bus passes for its employees. County also participates in Cuse Car, making cars available for county employees.

5. **Infrastructure Systems for Short- and Long-term**—Sustainable communities consider long-term when replacing infrastructure. Finding better wastewater treatment and delivery systems. Making sure that solutions consider both the short- and the long-term needs.

- **Portland, Oregon**—In late 1980s, started studying issues relating to water and wildlife protection to ensure against infrastructure sprawl.
- **What about Onondaga County?** 2010 development plan limits where we extend infrastructure. County has proposed combination of gray and green infrastructure to deal with wastewater overflow. Taking steps to find better solutions, avoiding “business as usual,” in solving wastewater overflow problem. How do we accelerate these positive steps within the culture of Onondaga County?

6. **Buildings and Housing**—Environmentally responsible and energy efficient housing.

- **Takoma Village, Washington, D.C.**—Co-housing community all built to green standard. Energy-saving and green technologies and materials throughout. Similar to Ithaca's Eco-Village—shared community facilities, and diverse mix of residents.
- **What about Onondaga County?** No policy yet on green buildings. Environmental Sustainability Committee will be looking at it.

7. **Energy Usage and Generation minus Fossil Fuels**—Growing trend toward replacing fossil fuels with alternative energy sources like solar, hydro, wind, biodiesel. Alternatives to coal-fired power plants are becoming more attractive and viable.

- **Fenner, Madison County**—County collects \$150,000/year from wind farm developer for rights to operate the business. Alternative energy significantly can impact budget and reduce taxes. The wind farm supplies about 13,000 homes with wind power.

- **What about Onondaga County?** County is implementing changes to lighting, HVAC, etc. Also has \$2.5 million Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant for projects that reduce total energy use and fossil fuel emissions, and improve energy efficiency. Plans for calculating carbon footprint for county operations and also for a community-wide study.

8. Waste Material Management—Holistic and value-based. There is no “away.” Everything put in the waste stream winds up somewhere. Important to promote reuse rather than disposal. Requires a change in thinking but impacts lifestyle for the better.

- **Arcata, California**—One of the best recycling programs in the country. Source of economic development, too. Local businesses develop smaller business using recyclable materials—for instance, creating works of art out of reclaimed wood or recycled glass.
- **What about Onondaga County?** OCRRA is performing a waste audit in county buildings to see how county can better reduce waste. Will develop policies from that.

Additional sustainable community traits not covered by study:

- Cultural Resources and entertainment—well-rounded and holistic
- High-quality education
- Health and safety—clean, safe, healthy communities
- Community involvement/Citizen participation

Conclusion: Sustainable communities generate social, economic, and environmental benefits, but they require a shift in thinking and in culture. Cities are definitely trending toward sustainability, with U.S. mayors taking things into their own hands to promote positive change for their communities.