Sustainability Progress Report, 2012
City of Dubuque, IA

Project Description

The City of Dubuque, IA has actively sought to increase sustainability since at least 2006, when the Dubuque City Council identified sustainability as a top priority. Over the next two years a grassroots community initiative called Sustainable Dubuque developed a vision statement and 11 supporting sustainability principles which were adopted by the City Council in 2008. The City of Dubuque has developed numerous sustainability projects and increased its sustainability efforts, but the City did not have a way to measure its overall progress. To fill that gap the City of Dubuque partnered with the University of Iowa (UI) during the 2011-2012 academic year. Graduate students from the School of Urban and Regional Planning, working under the Iowa Initiative for Sustainable Communities (IISC), collaborated with City staff and community stakeholders to create a sustainability indicator system and measure Dubuque's current level of progress.

The University of Iowa supported this and nine other sustainability projects completed by UI urban and regional planning students with a grant of $80,000 over two academic years—2011-2013.

In developing Dubuque's Sustainability Indicators, the UI students studied 44 different indicator systems from across the world and identified over 1,200 potential indicators. In collaboration with city staff and community members, UI students identified the final set of indicators, consisting specifically of indicators that are meaningful, measurable, comparable to other cities, and that advance Dubuque's sustainability goals. Many of the indicators were derived from the existing indicator systems; however, several indicators were developed specifically for Dubuque.

Four comparison cities were selected to provide insight into how Dubuque compares to its peer cities. To ensure the comparison cities were similar to Dubuque, the UI students, in collaboration with the City of Dubuque, developed five criteria for selection:

1) population size of 40,000 to 100,000,
2) interest in sustainability,
3) strength in manufacturing,
4) a non-suburb city located in the Midwest, and
5) a low college-student population.

The selected cities were Ames, IA; Decatur, IL; Oshkosh, WI; and St. Cloud, MN. The comparison cities meet all of the specified criteria except for Ames, which was chosen due to its interest in collaborating with Dubuque.

The UI students held several focus groups with city staff and individuals from other agencies and non-profits in Dubuque in order to develop the indicators and verify data sources and data interpretation for the report. The first two focus groups were held with the Dubuque

Performance Metrics Committee and the last focus group was held with the Sustainable Dubuque Collaboration Committee. The information and feedback provided by the focus groups were integral to the development of the indicators and the interpretation of the data. In addition, the UI students held a community open house in March to allow the public to provide feedback on the indicators and learn about the planning process.

The result of the project is the "Sustainability Progress Report 2012", which provides baseline measurements of sustainability in Dubuque for almost all of the 60 indicators. The few indicators that did not yet have data available were retained with the expectation that the data would be accessible for future reports. The report also provides an analysis of Dubuque's performance under the indicators over the last five years and insight into how Dubuque compares to its peer cities. Each indicator is scored as a "Strength," "Neutral," or "Weakness," or "Unknown" depending on the historical trend and comparison to peer cities. The indicator scores help clarify whether or not Dubuque is headed in the right direction for each indicator. However, the scores do not measure a precise level of sustainability, and are best interpreted as a general indication of performance that will encourage investigation into the reasons behind the indicator's score.

Sustainability as a concept can be abstract, and without ways to measure progress it is difficult for cities to truly understand whether they are improving. By measuring and evaluating Dubuque's progress, the City, its residents, and its businesses can build off Dubuque's strengths and improve its weaknesses. Furthermore, by comparing Dubuque's progress to other similar communities in the Midwest, Dubuque can gain a better understanding of what works and what doesn't, allowing the City to identify best practices and make strategic improvements.

The UI student's method of developing a sustainability indicator system that is attuned to the needs and characteristics of a specific city, while also being comparable to other cities, is one that will be useful to other cities as they look to measure their progress toward sustainability. In its own sustainability efforts the City of Dubuque has endeavored to create a replicable sustainability model for all communities, particularly those with populations under 200,000 where over 40% of the United States population lives. Similarly, this project provides a useful and replicable model for measuring progress toward sustainability in other cities.

The City of Dubuque and the Sustainable Dubuque Collaboration committee are pursuing *implementation* by currently reviewing the report and utilizing the information to make strategic improvements to Dubuque's sustainability. In June 2012 the Sustainable City Network hosted a webinar on the project. Over 1,200 (1,261, to be exact) people registered for the webinar, which was the highest turnout of any webinar hosted by the Sustainable City Network. The audience included planners, elected officials, and others from across the country. See http://www.sustainablecitynetwork.com/webinars/article_9297abc4-e245-11e1-a3b2-001a4bcf6878.html#user-comment-area for details. An article on the sustainability indicators project was the top downloaded article in the first six months of 2012 for the Sustainable City Network.