

So What Is Sustainability?

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The following was adapted from an article published in the September/October issue of The Review, the official magazine of the Michigan Municipal League (MML).

Sustainability is changing the way corporations and governments work. William Clay Ford, Jr., Executive Chairman and Chairman of the Board of Ford Motor Company, had this to say about sustainability: "Our economic and environmental goals are aligned. In fact, we believe that the best way for us to be more profitable is to make our business and products more sustainable." These words from one of Michigan's top business leaders show a paradigm shift in how corporate institutions are reevaluating business models and operational goals. The state of Michigan has had a sustainability agenda since 2002. Even the federal government, through legislation, regulation, and executive orders, now requires sustainability in its assessment of day-to-day operations.

The Triple Bottom Line

So what is sustainability? Sustainability has been defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It is a balance between three objectives: environmental, economic, and social outcomes. Known as the "triple bottom line," each of these goals must be met for an organization to become sustainable. Success is measured not just by financial gain, but also by environmental impact and the society to which it contributes.

What drives sustainability? It is the recognition that all the issues faced by municipalities are linked together. One simply cannot act on one issue without having an impact on others. Sustainability requires long-term planning, coupled with stakeholder involvement, to drive policy decisions. Mayor Bloomberg of New York City describes the ideology shift perfectly:

"When our Office of Long Term Planning began its work more than a year ago, the goal was to create a strategic land use plan. But we soon realized that you can't formulate a land use plan without thinking about transportation and you can't think about transportation without thinking about air quality. You can't think about air quality without thinking about energy and you certainly can't think about energy—or any of this—without thinking about global warming."

—Michael R. Bloomberg, Mayor, New York City

The lessons learned in New York, as well as in the private sector, are easily transferable to any size municipality. The difference in scale and priorities do not change the fact that sustainable communities identify the links between all municipal and private services. A path towards achieving sustainability exists for any organization that desires to achieve it.

SO WHAT IS SUSTAINABILITY? Cont.

As policymakers, municipal leaders hold a unique position to direct social change. Almost all sustainability initiatives require significant stakeholder and constituent participation, which ensures that a municipality does not outpace what the community wants. But with the right community outreach and tools in place to consider and implement community needs and wants, there is a way to achieve a wider sustainable model.

Assess Your Challenges

How does a municipality move from here to there? First, it needs to assess what challenges it faces. As every municipality and populace living within it is different than others, the challenges are also different. Common elements include water, sewer, air quality, transportation, land use planning, open space, recreation, solid waste, and recycling. Once those challenges are identified, the next phase requires determining which are the most serious, what ordinances and regulations currently apply, which regulations and ordinances can reasonably be developed, how easy or difficult will it be to meet the challenge, to what extent working on one issue affect another synergistically, and what stakeholder groups are working on a particular issue or available to work on the issue.

Address Your Priorities

Once priorities are set, identify the legal and practical impairments and opportunities. Next, set appropriate goals and objectives. Some of these goals and objectives should be measurable, so that a later assessment can identify whether the goals have been met or whether the plan needs adjustment. Once the plan is put into place, it must become a priority to see it incorporated and implemented. Periodic monitoring and auditing through metrics and community evaluation ensure that successes and failures are identified, choke points determined, and any needed adjustments implemented. Finally, once progress is documented, the planning process begins anew to implement improvements to the plan and tackle other priorities not part of the initial plan.

Path to Sustainability

Reaching a level of sustainability is not as difficult a road as it may seem. A thorough review of operations provides a road map to identifying inefficiencies and waste. There is “low hanging fruit” in terms of energy and resource use that can have immediate impacts with relatively little investment. Numerous private companies and public organizations can conduct an audit and generate ideas for improved operation, which will result in savings economically, but will also result in reduced use of natural resources and reductions in a municipal operation’s “carbon footprint.” Because most of the energy in Michigan is produced using fossil fuels, and predominantly coal, lower energy use equals a reduction in the amount of coal burned, which in turn leads to fewer greenhouse gases being emitted. In fact, it is easy to track how much carbon is not released and reported annually to your constituents. Plus, where fewer dollars are spent heating and lighting municipal buildings or running idling emergency and police vehicles, the more there is for other municipal priorities.

SO WHAT IS SUSTAINABILITY? Cont.

Sustainability is changing the way corporations and governments work. In addition to providing real benefits to the environment and local communities, a properly designed sustainability program will result in improvements in financial position for any organization, public or private. Sustainability is central to place making and creating viable, attractive, and healthy communities. Sustainable living is blind to size and demographics. It is at the core of what it means to be successful in the 21st century.

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