

Community Engagement in Northfield, Minnesota

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Introduction

The City of Northfield, Minnesota is located along the Cannon River, 35 miles southwest of the Twin Cities. Its population of nearly 19,900 is encompassed in seven square miles, and roughly 5,000 of these residents are students who attend Carleton College or St. Olaf College. In 2007, the Energy



City of Northfield, MN

Task Force, a volunteer advisory committee, was established in response to residents' concern over rising energy costs and economic uncertainty. The Task Force's mission was to identify opportunities for Northfield to become energy independent, first step was requiring the Task Force to calculate their energy use and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. As an ICLEI- Local Governments for Sustainability USA (ICLEI) member since 2006, the City of Northfield was able to utilize the Clean Air Climate Protection (CACP) software to help quantify their GHG emissions and energy use, and to utilize a framework from which to create an action plan to decrease their GHG emissions.

Strategy

In light of rising energy costs, economic uncertainty and climate change issues, the City of Northfield investigated ways to reduce their dependence on fossil fuels. A local community organizer championed the creation of the Energy Task Force to address these issues. Members of the Task Force met twice a month and included experts on alternative energy, university professors, and environmental engineers. The Task Force reported directly to the Environmental Quality Committee (EQC), an appointed committee whose primary focus is to advise on matters concerning environmental quality and natural resources and oversee the implementation of the environmental policy enacted by ordinance.

The Energy Task Force organized a community meeting to kick off their creation and to brainstorm ideas of how to gain energy independence. The audience totaled nearly 250 residents who learned about the event by word of mouth and through the City's monthly newsletter, *The Commons*, which is distributed along with monthly utility bills. The EQC writes an article each month that addresses environmental tips relevant to the season. For instance, the newsletter contains tips on water conservation during the summer months and weatherization during the fall and winter months. This newsletter was an important vehicle through which the Task Force communicated with and engaged the community. During the



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kick-off meeting, individuals were asked to provide ideas on how to become energy independent in writing, in addition to leaving their phone number should the Task Force want to follow-up with them.

After this meeting, six subcommittees were formed which were based on the ideas produced at the community kick-off meeting. These subcommittees focused on biomass combined heat and power, biomass gasification, carbon tax shift, cluster heat pump system, the [Minnesota Energy Challenge](#), and small and large wind turbines. The subcommittees researched these topics and compiled the results in a report entitled, “With Hope: A Resilient Community — An Action Plan for Northfield Area Energy Sustainability,” otherwise known as the Energy Task Force Master Report.

Progress

Challenges

While the efforts of the Energy Task Force were successful, they were not without challenges. Identifying local experts who had time to volunteer on the Task Force required a significant amount of social networking. Educating policy makers, City officials, and residents about the costs and benefits of green building designs, energy-efficient appliances, and reasons to decrease GHG emissions required continuous outreach and engagement. Policy makers asked why they should invest more capital up front in the construction of green buildings and installation of energy-efficient appliances when the payoff for these buildings is up to 15 years, at which point they will require replacement or significant maintenance. In other words, there may be no net savings. In addition, the lack of economies of scale in the small town context made procuring building materials and alternative fuels difficult, if not nearly impossible at times.



Source: www.visitingnorthfield.com

The Task Force set out to work together for one year at which point the Task Force would dissolve. After that year however, Task Force volunteers recommended that the City Council approve the creation of an Energy Board. In anticipation of the Council’s approval, the Task Force decided to continue meeting for a couple of months to ensure a smooth transition to the Energy Board, a formal board that, if created, would report directly to the City Council.

Because the Task Force was a volunteer committee, funding this effort was not a barrier. However, funding for the on-going work of the Energy Board presents a challenge. To implement the Energy Task Force Master Report, the Energy Board may investigate grant funds to hire a Sustainability Coordinator. In the meantime, to balance the constraints of the City budget and continue implementing the Energy Report, the City may hire an intern to temporarily fulfill the role of the Sustainability Coordinator until financial resources become available.

Successes and Achievements

The Task Force successfully established a baseline of both government operations and community-wide GHG emissions and produced the Energy Task Force Master Report, both significant achievements given the timeframe. A number of plans and initiatives in the city, including the comprehensive plan of Northfield and a Housing Redevelopment Authority pilot program, address

the recommendations presented in the Energy Task Force Master Report. City departments have referenced parts of the plan to guide their own work, and coordination between departments has increased. The construction of energy efficiency

municipal buildings is currently underway. The degree of participation from residents that were directly and indirectly involved in the Task Force's operations should be celebrated as a considerable achievement.

Applying Northfield's Successes

The Energy Task Force's engagement with the community and coordination with City departments was key to the production of the Task Force's report, the calculation of the city's GHG emissions, and the creation of the Energy Board. Communities seeking to replicate this accomplishment may consider forming a volunteer advisory committee of at least four volunteers to research a topic(s) and to provide guidance to the decision-making body. Talking to other communities that have created an advisory committee, like the Task Force, will provide insight on the process, the challenges they encountered and the successes they achieved. Other ways to apply Northfield's success include:

- Establish a Task Force start and end date and meeting frequency.
- Ask a variety of stakeholders to participate. Engage local experts - they are a wealth of knowledge and are vested members of the community.
- Assign tasks to volunteers with clear due dates to make the most of the members' time.

- Host a kick-off meeting to get residents involved and excited. Hold the event in a space that is flexible and allows the group to expand.
- Provide a way for residents to share their ideas and a means to contact them should the Task Force want to follow-up (e.g., provide their phone numbers along with their ideas).
- During the research and outreach process continually inform residents and the decision-making body of the Task Force's progress. Utilize existing forms of communication like the Task Force did through a monthly article in *The Commons*.
- And don't forget to celebrate the successes!

Lastly, contact ICLEI to learn what tools are available and how ICLEI can help connect you with like communities. ICLEI has created a toolkit designed to provide the resources and tools needed to help small communities begin working on environmental agendas, climate action plans, and a sustainable future.

Resources

[City of Northfield, MN Environmental Quality Commission](#)

[ICLEI—Local Governments for Sustainability USA](#)

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