

# SUSTAINABLE CITY INITIATIVE / SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY ROUNDTABLE

Olympia, Washington

In 1991, Olympia, the capital of the state of Washington, accepted a challenge from the State Department of Ecology to help define what it would take to become a sustainable city. Located at the southern end of the metropolitan region extending south from Vancouver B.C., Olympia and neighboring cities of Lacey and Turnwater are the hub of a rapidly growing area around south Puget Sound. Population of this 84-square mile North Thurston County urban growth area is increasing at 3.5 percent per year, and is projected to reach 184,000 by 2015. The area faces the familiar challenges of rapid urbanization: suburban sprawl, the development of prime agricultural land and wildlife habitat, water pollution, and traffic jams. Increased housing costs, competition for jobs, homelessness, and drug abuse are some of the economic and social consequences.

Instead of addressing each of these problems independently, Olympia is beginning to employ a more holistic approach, thinking of the city as an ecosystem where everything is connected and interdependent. Known for its award-winning initiatives such as its residential, curbside recycling and volunteer Stream Team efforts, Olympia was already on the path to sustainability when the city first introduced the concept of sustainability on Earth Day 1991 by mailing a newsletter to all residents and sponsoring an all-day celebratory event. The City initiated a Sustainable Community Roundtable to coordinate a region-wide educational process and embarked on an internal process using sustainability as a theme for policy-making and employee education.

Thus began an ongoing process of articulating a common vision of sustainability for the region, with an annual assessment of progress and celebration of accomplishments.

## Olympia's Sustainable City Initiative

In 1993 the City adopted a Sustainable City Philosophy whose preamble reads:

*The City of Olympia acknowledges its responsibility for leadership in creating a sustainable community - locally, regionally, and globally. A sustainable community is one that persists over generations and is far-seeing enough, flexible enough, and wise enough to maintain its natural, economic, social, and political support systems.*



Since then Olympia has used “sustainable community” as the integrating theme for much of its planning. For example:

- Sustainability criteria have been applied to major policy decisions such as the new Comprehensive Plan adopted under the State's Growth Management Act, the recently adopted water supply plan, and stormwater management plans.
- Sustainability performance indicators for City policies and programs are being drafted, and the City plans to publish them in an annual “State of the City” report at the beginning of each year's budget process.
- The City is preparing an employee education program based on a survey assessing employees' knowledge about and interest in sustainability concepts.

## Sustainable Community Roundtable

The Sustainable Community Roundtable, initiated by the City of Olympia in 1991, was incorporated as a nonprofit organization the following year. It uses innovative participatory processes to facilitate the transition to sustainability in South Puget Sound. It works with individuals, governments, businesses, and civic organizations to integrate planning and action around social, environmental and economic issues. In 1993 the Roundtable received an award for citizen participation from the Washington Chapter of the American Planning Association and the Planning Association of Washington.

The Roundtable has convened a series of public forums aimed at demonstrating the interrelationships between social, environmental and economic issues and sponsors

the “Nights of the Roundtable,” evening presentations on innovative sustainability initiatives around the country and the world. Roundtable members are working with other communities to set up a computer network and to set up a Cascadia Sustainable Communities Network, a coalition of community, business and government organizations, dedicated to increasing regional identity.

In 1995, the Roundtable released its second *State of the Community* report which reviews Olympia's progress in becoming sustainable. The first edition, published on Earth Day 1993, was one of the first of its kind. The updated report addresses the interrelated issues of human culture: environmental issues, resource consumption, social equity and justice, governance and the economy. It describes a vision of sustainability, identifies trends in using selected indicators, highlights positive steps toward the vision and gives very specific guidelines for what individuals and the community can do. It asks important questions about the potential impact a proposed program or policy might have on elements of sustainability and acts as a screen or matrix for decision-making.

## Accomplishments

The report, *Steps in the Right Direction*, contains some of the following highlights:

- Cooperative growth management planning by Thurston County and incorporated cities has resulted in: 1) a regional land use and transportation strategy aimed at developing urban core areas at a density that will support public transportation; 2) protecting wetlands, agricultural and forest lands; and 3) planning in advance for public services and utilities needed for the projected population.
- Representatives of 17 diverse interests are collaborating to create a Nisqually River Management Plan that takes into consideration the environmental, economic, cultural, and historical significance of the entire river basin.
- To promote waste reduction and recycling, the Port of Olympia, Thurston County, City of Olympia, and Economic Development Council have initiated a collaborative venture called ReDAC (Recycling Development and Action Committee) to encourage new and expanded secondary material manufacturing businesses.
- A Green Jobs Program, initiated by the local Energy Outreach Center with support from the City of Olympia and lo-

cal businesses, aims to save energy and water, reduce housing costs, and create jobs.

- Community Supported Agriculture is expanding with around 1000 participants in 1994.
- To help families in need, a downtown Family Support Center provides services from a dozen agencies: job placement, counseling, and health and legal services.

### Challenges

The greatest challenges have centered on funding, creating a viable organization, and finding ways to communicate the concepts and implications of sustainability.

Both the City of Olympia's Sustainable City Initiative and the Sustainable Community Roundtable have worked with minimal budgets. The City program has been developed with existing staff resources and several small grants from state agencies while the Roundtable has been supported by local fundraising and small budget allocations from the City of Olympia and the City of Lacey. Both Olympia and the Roundtable are currently cooperating on a project funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to continue refining the Roundtable's regional indicators and to develop parallel indicators to guide City policy and budget decisions. The regional Olympia Air Pollution Control Authority has provided additional funds for a more detailed look at air quality indicators.

The City publishes information on Sustainable City activities in its monthly newsletter to residents. City staff frequently refer to sustainable city goals in their public involvement and education on land use, transportation planning and resource management. The Roundtable relies primarily on the *State of the Community* report. Members have made presentations to local organizations and elected officials. As part of the USEPA-funded indicator project, Roundtable members are working with eight community groups and businesses to explore the relevance and use of indicators in their activities. The Roundtable plans to publicize the "Steps in the Right Direction" through a traveling exhibit, community event and possibly a video.

The efforts of the City of Olympia and the Sustainable Community Roundtable are a prime example of long-term vision, partnership, and integrative thinking. They provide a model for other communities seeking to undertake similar processes.

—CONCERN, Inc.

## How To Get in Touch with Sustainable City Initiative & Sustainable Community Roundtable

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**Scope:** City/county/region

**Inception Date:** 1991

**Participants:** Community members, businesses, civic and government organizations, Native American Tribal Councils

**Project type:** Comprehensive community development, sustainable indicators, public education

**Methods used:** Legislative initiatives, public dialogues, educational events, community involvement activities, publications

**Lessons learned:** The concept of sustainability can guide planning and policymaking as well as reshape governmental decision-making; participatory planning processes work. Public education and outreach is essential for collaborative ventures. The process needs to be ongoing, with feedback on progress and celebrations of success.



## UPDATE December 1997

### City of Olympia Sustainable City Initiative

The City of Olympia continues to advance sustainability policies in programs and employee practices. It

expanded its resource recovery operations to include plastics and yard waste; sought energy-saving opportunities in all City buildings; expanded water conservation and groundwater protection activities; and began a community policing program.

In 1996, Olympia published its first State of the City report with indicators on nine "pressure points" affected by growth and change (e.g. land use, solid waste, public safety, community participation) and related City accomplishments. Accompanying the report are a 4-page tabloid summary and a 17-minute videotape. Olympia joined 36 U.S. cities in the Cities for Climate Protection Campaign sponsored by the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI).

### Sustainable Community Roundtable

The Roundtable launched its website, <http://www.olywa.net/roundtable>, as part of the national Sustainable Communities Network. It publishes annual updates of the *State of the Community* report and a newsletter, *Sustainable South Sound*. As resources allow, the Roundtable publishes an in-depth probe of one topic area, exploring the issues and identifying 12 indicators for each (Air Quality, in cooperation with City of Olympia, in 1996; Families, Youth & Children, with support from local youth service agencies, the YMCA Earth Service Corps, and Evergreen State College students, in 1997). Other current topical issues are population/growth management and local economy. The Roundtable served as a catalyst for the Sound Exchange, which issues a local currency (Sound HOURS) for exchange of goods and services in the South Puget Sound area. In cooperation with the Northwest Earth Institute, the popular Nights of the Roundtable series has launched study groups on voluntary simplicity, deep ecology, bioregionalism, and sustainability.

The Roundtable has accomplished all of this with just a few very committed volunteers. Now its challenges are obtaining adequate funding, attracting skilled volunteers, formalizing the organizational structure, and establishing itself as a credible neutral facilitator that can bring together diverse perspectives.

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