

THE CAMPAIGN FOR A SUSTAINABLE MILWAUKEE

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

The Campaign for a Sustainable Milwaukee is a broad-based community effort to define and implement an alternative economic development plan for the Milwaukee metropolitan area. Unions, community organizations and political leaders are working together to create and retain family-supporting jobs, build healthy communities and restore natural environments. Sustainable Milwaukee's four task forces address major priorities: jobs and training, credit, transportation and the environment, and education.

"Rebuilding Milwaukee from the ground up"

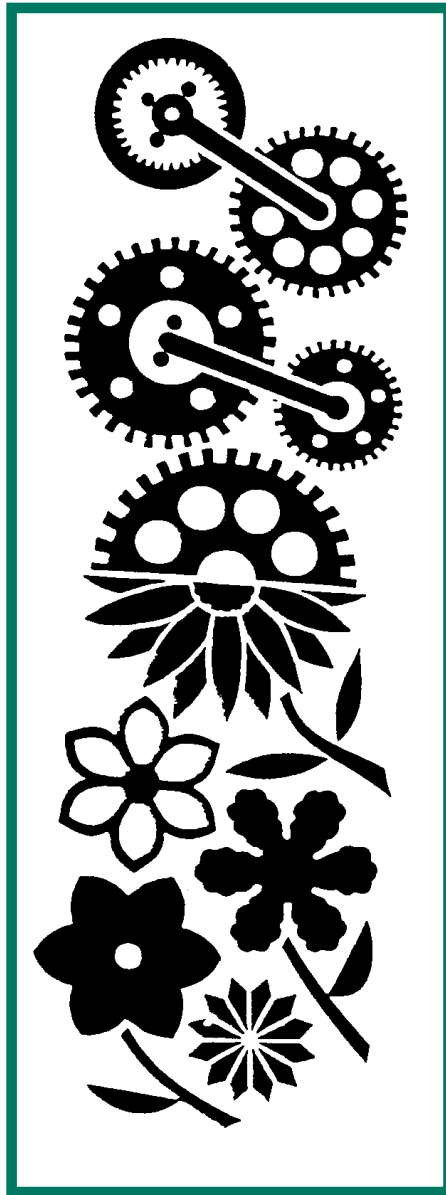
The groups and individuals who joined to form Sustainable Milwaukee have come together to overcome a series of forces that many had been working to overcome individually. These issues include job flight out of the Milwaukee region, deteriorating wages and working conditions in many of the jobs that remain, divestment from Milwaukee by financial institutions, the destruction of Milwaukee's natural environment, and public policies at every level that subsidized the same forces that were destroying the community.

In October 1994, Sustainable Milwaukee held a Milwaukee Community Congress, attended by more than 200 community activists, union members and elected officials, to debate and ratify a plan to address these and other problems. Key elements in the plan, *Rebuilding Milwaukee from the Ground Up*, include campaigns to create good, family-supporting jobs in the Milwaukee area and to improve mass transit within the region.

Supporting community efforts

One example of how Sustainable Milwaukee has made a difference thus far is its involvement with Esperanza Unida, a

well-known, community-based economic development organization located on the South Side. Esperanza Unida has been working for many years to meet the needs of low income central city Milwaukee residents. One of the organization's accomplishments has been the creation of training businesses that provide services to central city neighborhoods including asbestos removal, metal fabricating, auto repair, and day care.



One barrier to employment for people in Esperanza Unida's neighborhoods is that residents have not been able to obtain certified vocational training. There is a technical college in Milwaukee, but central city residents, many of whom speak Spanish as their primary language, were not able to use the resources of the technical school.

To change this situation, four of Sustainable Milwaukee's active members who are also board members of the technical college worked with the school and with Esperanza Unida to create a certified technical training site at Esperanza's neighborhood center. The technical college is now providing resources in a central city neighborhood, residents are using these resources, and many low-income residents have received certification and obtained jobs as laborers building roads for the State of Wisconsin.

Rich Oulahan, executive director of Esperanza Unida, calls Sustainable Milwaukee "the most significant development I've seen in Milwaukee in years. I've never seen so many people working together to focus on the root cause of our social problems."

Choosing meaningful issues

One key element in the early success of Sustainable Milwaukee is that it has identified specific issues to work on that are meaningful to people and that focus on making Milwaukee more livable for all residents, especially those with low incomes. Sustainable Milwaukee spent months bringing people together to ask them what they wanted and what could they do together to make a difference. As a result, more than 100 people showed up for a recent Sustainable Milwaukee general meeting.

According to Bill Dempsey, the led organizer of the campaign, "there is a sense among those getting involved that their lives can noticeably change as a result of this effort." Instead of simply criticizing the ineffectiveness of government and business to meet the need of communities, Sustainable Milwaukee decided to define the issues that are important to people and build a campaign to make people's goals a reality.

Living wage campaign

The Living Wage Campaign was chosen as a priority because the Milwaukee area has a higher percentage of jobs—50.8 percent—paying less than \$20,000 a year than nearly any other metropolitan area in the country. Sustainable Milwaukee is working to pass a Living Wage Ordinance that would guarantee a \$7.70 wage floor with health care benefits for all service workers hired through city contracts.

The bill to implement the Living Wage Ordinance received a unanimous vote out of the Public Improvements Committee of the Milwaukee City Council in June, and awaits a vote before the full council. Once this bill is passed into law it will be used as a launching pad to convince county, school district and private sector employers to live up to the same standards.

Central city transit campaign

Transportation is another key issue and opportunity for collaboration. Sustainable Milwaukee is bringing together low income people who could benefit from a good mass transit system with environmentalists who are working to reduce pollution in the region.

The Milwaukee County bus system has experienced falling ridership, rising fares, and decreasing investment in the bus system in the context of a worsening regional economy. There is no rail, subway or light rail system in the county except Amtrak, which only travels between major cities. Many low-income, inner city residents currently do not have access to reliable transportation to the suburbs, where many jobs are located.

Sustainable Milwaukee intends to show that a good mass transit system is critical for the regional economy, and that the only way to create such a system is through government intervention. Priorities are support for light rail development and full funding of central city buses. Sustainable Milwaukee is also becoming involved with the process of allocating the hundreds of millions of dollars of federal transportation funds allocated to the state of Wisconsin.

Sources of support

The major financial support for Sustainable Milwaukee has been a \$150,000 grant from the Joyce Foundation. The Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program was another important supporter. Sustainable Milwaukee decided not to ask member organizations for substantial amounts of money in order to avoid sapping their other efforts, in reality or in appearance. However, many organizations, including elected officials, have given in-kind donations of supplies and staff time to support the campaign.

How To Get in Touch with The Campaign for a Sustainable Milwaukee

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Scope: Milwaukee metropolitan area
Inception Date: 1993
Participants: Labor, environmental, religious and community organizations, and elected officials from city, county and state governments
Project type: Process-oriented planning, community economic development, coalition building
Methods used: Community organizing and policy development
Lessons learned: People will invest time in an effort if there is a sense that their lives can really change because of it.

A key coalition partner has been Progressive Milwaukee, an organization that works to get progressive political candidates elected to office in the Milwaukee metropolitan area. At least 14 elected officials from city, county and state governments who are affiliated with Progressive Milwaukee have participated in Sustainable Milwaukee. The involvement of public officials has given the campaign a sense that its goals can become a reality, because those with the ability to make them happen are involved.

So far, there has been almost no political or other opposition to the Campaign for a Sustainable Milwaukee. The biggest obstacle to moving the plan forward, staff members say, has been the lack of enough staff to work on the campaign.

—*Jobs & Environment Campaign*



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Since the four task forces completed their work in the spring of 1996, Sustainable Milwaukee has focused on two priorities: wages and transit. The Living Wage Campaign has experienced some success in raising wages, ensuring benefits, increasing worker safety, and protecting the right to organize. One of the two industries targeted was nursing home care. The ensuing “dignity campaign” was largely successful in meeting its goal of increasing the number of care providers per patient. The Central City Transit Campaign worked with the City Council to get the state to redirect its allocated Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) funds to a light rail system for Milwaukee, more buses, and some road improvements. It was opposed, however, by suburban communities, which wanted widened highways with more access ramps and HOV lanes. In a compromise both provisions were eliminated from the state budget.

Job access was another issue raised by the Campaign. To address this, Sustainable Milwaukee will open a workers’ center which will match low-income people with training programs for jobs in printing, construction, and manufacturing. In addition, Sustainable Milwaukee partnered with four schools and several neighborhood organizations for the “lighted schoolhouse” campaign. With extended hours, the schools serve as community centers providing day care and adult literacy programs.

Funding continues to be a problem. Although there has been a large base of community support, the Campaign’s adversarial role has provoked some constituencies. The Wall Street Journal published a story about one group desiring to shut down the Campaign, citing it as a threat to the corporate community. Director Bill Dempsey feels, however, that there must be equity in the use of resources and that the incentives that have encouraged disparities must be reversed.

—*CONCERN, Inc.*