Why is Governance Essential to a Sustainable Community?

Key to a sustainable community is having the governing capability to seize opportunities, move on problems and anticipate signals on the horizon that will impact a municipality’s ability to prosper. This requires elected and appointed officials who are committed to good governance as well as good government. Sustainable communities possess the organizational capacity to embrace best management practices, create an environment of professionalism and foster civic engagement. While formal and informal cooperative agreements are often discussed, encouraged and sometimes implemented in southwestern Pennsylvania, each municipality must decide for itself to take the actions necessary to be sustainable.

Sustainable communities are attractive communities because those seeking to invest in economic development or housing recognize when elected officials are committed to a cost efficient and professional management style. This translates into an assurance that the tax dollar will be used wisely and more so, will be invested following principles of sustainable development.

How is this Essential Linked to other Sustainable Community Essentials?

Governance provides leadership by setting goals through plans and ordinances, identifying priorities, directing public investments and providing public goods and services required by the basic duty to protect the public health, safety and welfare. Government also sets the context for private investment and may provide regulatory or financial incentives to support it.

Governance is the broadest of the essentials addressed in this series of Resource Sheets because it can influence all of the aspects of a community’s life.

Resources for Communities

Innovation Clinic at GSPIA; University of Pittsburgh
www.lgcic.pitt.edu

Institute of Politics at the University of Pittsburgh
www.iop.pitt.edu
412/624-1837

League of Women Voters of Greater Pittsburgh
http://palwv.org/pittsburgh/
412/261-4284

Local Government Academy
www.localgovernmentacademy.org
412/237-3171

Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development
www.newpa.com/index.aspx
866/466-3972
Municipalities can take actions to become a sustainable community. Each action should have an expected outcome. These outcomes or benchmarks can be used to evaluate if the action is effective.

- The governing body should adopt a set of sustainability principles that are used to evaluate the sustainability of any action they are contemplating. As part of a code of ethics, sustainability principles frame the process and decision making of governing. The outcome benchmark is whether, in fact, the evaluation is done and the documentation for it. The goal is to achieve a triple bottom line (social equity, economic development and environmental conservation) for each action.

- Conduct a Sustainability Assessment of municipal policies, facilities, and operations. This can identify areas for cost savings as well as ways to achieve the triple bottom line mentioned above.

- Establish a policy that supports professional development for elected officials and staff, including attendance of the Local Government Academy’s Newly Elected Officials Course.

- A comprehensive plan should be created or updated to reflect the sustainability principles. This should be done on a multi-municipal basis to obtain the benefits authorized in the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code. The outcome benchmark is the observable link between the principles and the plan.

- The intent to implement the plan can be demonstrated by adopting zoning and subdivision/land development ordinances consistent with it.

- Municipal decisions whether by the governing body or staff should calculate the long-term costs and benefits.

- A major equity consideration is that the cost of actions should be borne by the users or beneficiaries of them. The outcome benchmark requires that this can be shown and that none of the costs are inadvertently allocated to others.

- The municipality should offer high quality goods and services appropriate to the demographics of the community. The outcome benchmark is to measure the provision of goods and services against national standards. For example, are the recreation opportunities such as ball and soccer fields and tennis courts provided for youth and for older adults the correct number and are they maintained?

- The municipality should seek aggressively to partner with others to ensure that purchases are made at the best price and that goods and services are provided at the least possible cost and live up to clean and green standards.

- The goals of social equity, environmental conservation and cost efficiency are served by using municipal codes and incentives to focus on the core area through infill and brownfield development and conserving the open, green space outside the core. This locates any new jobs near where people live and eliminates the need for redundant infrastructure to serve greenfield development. The outcome benchmark is specific provisions or ordinances and in the budget that demonstrate commitment to the goals.

- The process for evaluating commercial development proposals as well as business retention and attraction programs should consider workforce as a key criteria. Are incentive programs attracting firms that pay family sustaining wages and benefits? Does the community have the workforce for the industry? Municipal officials should consider the extent to which the zoning ordinance supports a fair and competitive business climate and builds community through employment opportunities.

- Municipal human resource recruitment and development should ensure that employees are committed to the principles of sustainability. The outcome benchmark is demonstrated over time as municipality business is conducted.

- The conduct of the governing board should affirm civic engagement and public participation. Transparency of decision making requires broad dissemination of proposed municipal actions in easily understood language and encouraging citizen participation and an open dialogue with them and among elected officials and staff at open meetings. The outcome benchmark is whether this is done in a lively but civil manner at board and committee meetings.

- A social equity benchmark is the appointment of citizens to boards, commissions and authorities commensurate with their racial, gender or ethnic percentage of the population.

- A revenue-expenditure trend analysis should be conducted at least annually to identify any potential service delivery issues. Several analyses should be conducted based on a range of realistic assumptions regarding future revenues and expenses. The outcome benchmarks are whether this is done, whether elected and appointed officials demonstrate attention to the analysis and the use of the analysis in municipal decision-making and especially the operating and capital budgets.

- Tax revenue should be sufficient to maintain the public infrastructure at a high level and replace it when needed.

- A tax revenue reserve should be sufficient to weather unexpected shortfalls or meet a critical need.

- Bonded debt or lines of credit should not be used to meet day-to-day expenses.

- Accountability by comparing goals and outcomes on a regular – at least annual – basis.

- Some cities are helping to finance the installation of solar panels on homes. Similar to water and sewer lines, the upfront cost of installation is high and thus is a disincentive for individual owners to take action. However, because the long-term payback is positive the city or an authority can undertake installation and recoup the cost through monthly utility fees similar to water and sewer assessments.

- The municipality can take leadership by conducting a greenhouse gas inventory. All signs point to an economy in which carbon emissions will be increasingly expensive, causing constraints on their production. Therefore, cost savings can be realized earlier by being proactive. Pioneering the use of new technologies may also result in the creation of a new local industry with the potential for substantial exports and local wealth production.

- A general benchmark of healthy local governance is a high voter turnout at elections.
Peters Township is a growing community located in Washington County along the border with Allegheny County, giving it proximity to many regional services.

In 1976, Peters Township’s Home Rule Charter was implemented. This charter continues to underpin Peters’ success. Notable provisions on the operations of the government include:

1. Council Manager Form, with no committees of Council and a strong manager system. This minimizes political issues in the operational aspects of the Township and fosters a cooperative atmosphere amongst divergent opinions.

2. A Planning Director was a required position in the charter to address both physical and operational issues. This requirement reflects the history of the residents to look forward as to the needs of the community. The community has been very firm in adhering to a 10 year schedule of comprehensive planning. This has fostered the completion of many projects beyond the standard infrastructure improvements to amenities such as the Library, Parks and Recreation Center.

3. The charter has a number of ethical provisions, prohibiting employee participation in political campaigns, anti-nepotism and receipt of gifts.

The community also had a history of consistent management. Since 1964 there have only been two managers. This stability has provided the opportunity to develop a professional and dedicated staff, as well as strong support for the elected officials.

Communication has been a strong ingredient of our community and has continued to progress. The township started the first community-wide newsletter in 1983 to address the lack of coverage by the media. This has expanded over the years to other media. The cable television operation is one of the most extensive in the area and is a cooperative venture with the school district. Council and Planning meetings are available on the station as well as on the internet. The website has continued to evolve and Peters Township was one of the first communities to implement a Citizen Resource Management (CRM) program. This program permits citizens to make a request, ask a question or register a concern with the municipality via the internet or by telephone. In Peters Township, if the concern is not addressed within a specified time it is forwarded to the department head or the Township manager. The CRM has been an effective tool to gauge performance and department workloads.

The budgeting and financial process is also a key factor. The budget has evolved over the years to become a major policy and communications tool, including development of performance measures for the elected officials and community. The Township is the only community in the state to have obtained GFOA excellence awards in Budget, Financial Reporting and Popular Annual reporting. In addition, the Township has developed some key policy positions on financial issues, including a debt limit policy of 10% of available revenues and a formal investment policy that provides for secure and diversified investments.

Peters Township is working to address the challenges it faces. The municipality’s financial success is in large part based on growth. This has caused a demand for services that cannot always be met as fast as the public desires. In addition, it is recognized that the local economy has to develop into one that is sustainable. The next comprehensive planning process that is scheduled to begin in 2010 will focus on that aspect. The community is very conservative in staffing. A staff of 78 employees is very lean for a community of 22,000 residents. The Township has been willing to make the tough decisions when needed. A prime example was the decision in 1988 to start hiring paid firefighters. This was a controversial decision, but necessary to community safety. Peters Township is now trying to team with neighboring communities to eventually regionalize this service to make it sustainable.

Case courtesy of Peters Township