Community Assistantship Program

. . .a program of the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA)

GreenStep Cities Internship

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Introduction: GreenStep Cities

GreenStep Cities is an exclusive voluntary program which aims to make all the Minnesota cities resilient, healthy, and sustainable by providing them with a very clear pathway to greater sustainability based upon implementing best practices which are designed with consideration of different sizes and capabilities of Minnesota cities. The best practices of GreenStep Cities are developed by field experts from Minnesota and, thus, are the proven best practices. According to the GreenStep Cities website, "Minnesota GreenStep Cities is a voluntary challenge, assistance, and recognition program to help cities achieve their sustainability goals through implementation of 28 best practices focused on cost savings and energy use reduction."

What is GreenStep Cities all about?

Minnesota GreenStep Cities is about shaping the Minnesotan cities in such a way that their goals are achieved with the least cost and least energy consumption in the shortest possible time period by implementation of proven best practices. Thus, GreenStep Cities is all about:

- Providing a pathway to sustainability by taking actions which are cost-effective, pragmatic, and achievable for most cities.

- Making the best practices more feasible by providing assistance and peer learning for cities so they can achieve their best practices with the least effort possible.

- Achieving meaningful reductions in energy use and related cost savings.

- Offering our resources like leadership and actions roles of our community members and institutions to help cities stretch their limited city funds.

- Eventually, boosting and promoting innovation.

Why GreenStep Cities?

In context of GreenStep Cities, one frequently asked question is "What is there so special about GreenStep Cities that makes it different from other organizations?" There is no one specialty, but many GreenStep Cities has multiple hallmark specialties. Some of them that surf on the top are:

- It is very exclusive and focused only on Minnesotan cities.

- The majority of Minnesota cities (i.e. 500 out of 855) are under 1,000 in population. Appropriately, GreenStep Cities is greatly geared towards smaller towns.

- The best practices of GreenStep Cities are the best proven practices and are developed by field experts from Minnesota.

- The best proven practices are very action-oriented.

- The best practices are equally as flexible as they are feasible.

- GSC understands the importance of creditability and its potential for motivating. So, GSC gives credit for actions already taken and assists in identifying new actions to take.

- It is often a hard task to find the right resource and the right person. GSC helps in identifying real resources and people who can be of real help in specific desired best practices.

- GSC provides a framework for every city's sustainability efforts, which can be of great help in the future.

- Eventually, understanding the importance of transparency GSC provides mechanism to share results with community people or resident who is the part of community directly or indirectly.

Why should any city be GreenStep City?

If your city is in Minnesota, and if you want your city to be more sustained, then there is no reason not to be GreenStep City. GSC will continuously make your city become more sustainable, resilient, and healthier than ever. The effects of being a GSC will be different for different cities, but here are a few effects that GSC has analyzed from previous researches:

- With participation in or being a GSC, it can be cheaper for your city to operate and build green buildings.

- Being a GSC can lower the costs experienced by government, businesses, educational institutes, and the citizens.

- Your community can be blessed with cleaner water and air.

- Your community can be walk-able, bike-able, and thus healthier, which is a must for healthier citizens and businesses as well.

- Local food production, better transportation options, greener jobs, and attracting more businesses are some other plus points.

- Most importantly, your city will be in the list of Minnesota GreenStep Cities: an honor any city of Minnesota would like to possess.

Best Practices of GreenStep Cities

The best practices of GSC are the best proven practices which are developed by the experts in their particular fields from Minnesota. In addition, those best practices are designed and constructed in a way that will be very efficacious. When developing those best practices, the experts considered the different sizes and capabilities of varied cities and towns of Minnesota. The 28 best practices of GSC are categorized into five categories, and they are:

1. Buildings and Lighting

2. Transportation

3. Land Use

4. Environmental Management

5. Economic and Community Development.

These 28 best practices are further dispersed into 168 unique and very detailed actions.

Objective

The ultimate goal is to promote sustainability in the rural communities of Northwest Minnesota. GreenStep Cities, being a voluntary organization, focuses only on Minnesotan cities/town and provides pathway to sustainability. Hence, the ultimate objective of this project is to promote GreenStep Cities in Northwest Minnesota and help them achieve their sustainable goals through GSC by implementing 28 best proven practices which focus on cost savings and energy use reduction through GSC. In addition, this project also highlights some barriers that have been

obstacles on the way towards sustainable development and thus works on the solutions to overcome those barriers.

Methodology:

1. Development of list of cities/towns to visit

Northwest Minnesota has a number of cities/towns ranging from really small to fairly large in size and thus covers a good portion of the state. With a limited time span for the job, it doesn't make sense to take all the cities/towns into consideration. In that case, it is immensely important to come up with a list of cities/towns that deserve to be studied with priority. Taking into account the potential of impacting and influencing the neighboring cities/towns, a list of cities/towns is developed, which consists of towns that are county seats and emerging towns in Northwest Minnesota. The list of the cities/towns along with their respective counties considered for the project is as follows:

City Name	County	County Seat
Crookston	Polk	Yes
East Grand Forks	Polk	No
Moorhead	Clay	Yes
Hawley	Clay	No
Dilworth	Clay	No
Breckenridge	Wilkin	Yes
Fosston	Polk	No
Hallock	Kittson	Yes
Thief River Falls	Pennington	Yes
Warren	Marshall	Yes
Ada	Norman	Yes
Fisher	Polk	No

2. Background research of cities/towns to visit and develop interview questions

Oftentimes, it is very important and thus supportive to have basic knowledge about the subject we are anticipating to study or work on. It is important to conduct minor background research on those cities prior to approaching them because that gives you a hint on how to start a conversation, what to talk about extemporaneously, and thereby prove that you are well prepared for task you are performing. Subconsciously, this will create a good first impression.

Following the minor background research, a set of questions were developed to ask in the interview. It is extremely important that the questions are relevant to the topic and plausible enough to reflect the goal of the project. Consequently, the questions were developed deliberately with the consideration of the prior performance of the city, potential capabilities of the city, and not to mention that are structured according to the 28 best proven practices of GreenStep Cities.

3. Set appointments with early interviewees

Most likely, the project is anticipated to be very discursive if there are no designated resources, whether powered by an individual, an organization, or any other entity. It is very important to have the right source (or individual, in the case of an interview) to get the job done. Moreover, it becomes very imperative to identify real resource people who can be of great help. Fortunately, most of the board members of the NWRSDP (Northwest Regional Sustainable Development Partnership) are from all across northwest Minnesota. In this case, it would be close to impossible to find anyone better than the board members for an early interview. However, some

of the people in the list of early interviewees are the local champions who are extra energetic and community destiny-driven individuals.

4. Networking and making connections

It is often a hard task to get ahold of the right people and the right resource at the right time. However, in this case, we had the early interviewees who were Northwest board members, city authorities, local champions, and so on. This made the job a lot easier because they are the source, and through them, different connections were made. It is amazing how networking and connections can help you get closer to the goals at hand.

5. Community approach

After networking and making connections, it was time to reach to the local community people who actually are the backbone of our communities. Inspired by the saying "people are the leaders of leaders," communities are the kernel focus of the whole project. The goal of the project can be achieved only if community people are well educated about GreenStep Cities, and, thus, sustainability. With the help of the early interviewees, it was possible to reach the communities and talk to them. Community gatherings, city council meetings, public meetings, etc, were the perfect time and place to give presentations, talk, or edify the people about GreenStep Cities and sustainability. When there are lots of people attending the meeting, like in public meeting or city council meetings, it makes more sense to educate them because it will reach to more potential community people and the quantity is relatively high. Hence, the purpose of educating the community will be more effective. A lot of presentations have been done in the communities of northwest Minnesota. These presentations were the first medium to acquaint them with

GreenStep Cities along with best proven practices that will help them achieve their sustainability goals.

6. Report writing

It is essentially important to jot down the information retrieved from the interviews that were conducted. If someone has to carry on the job, they don't have to waste their time conducting interviews again and again. They can just look at the report and figure out the answers they wanted. However, there are lots of other advantages of writing reports. It is very professional to write reports and keep track of everything done, especially in the form of written words. It will be very useful as a reference when some projects are to be conducted in particular areas. Moreover, it will be very useful in the future when someone wants to know about the particular town. Realizing the importance of report writing, after every interview, a report is written along with general information about the interviewers and interviewees. This way, the one who will be in charge of this project in the future can easy identify when and where the interview was conducted, who the interviewer was, who the interviewee was, and related information which makes it very feasible to pick up the work where it was left off. A sample of the visiting template and a report is attached here.

7. Story writing

Story writing has been a great medium to teach a lesson from the very beginning of human civilization. Moreover, every community has its own folk stories to tell, and most likely, those stories either have information or some kind of moral lesson to offer at the end. It is surprising how stories can influence people. Generalizing the importance and potential of stories, there are

some stories written to influence, inspire, and motivate the people and communities of northwest Minnesota. All the stories written are the stories discovered within northwest Minnesota during the progression of this project. When interviewing different people from different communities of northwest Minnesota, it becomes apparent to come up with lots of varied stories. With the pure motive of inspiring, motivating, and acknowledging the people around northwest Minnesota about some interesting projects that have been done, are ongoing, and future projects within northwest Minnesota, these stories are written. One sample of story is attached below:

Try, Try, Try Until You Get It Done

They say try, try, and try until you die. However, do we really try until we die, or do we really try until we get it done? To be honest, I don't think we do. In fact, we hardly try enough times to succeed; most of the time, we simply give up. The question that tickles my mind is, how many times do we keep on trying, and how do we even know if our tries are working? Well, the answer I have found from my experience is to try *until you get there* or *until you get it done*. If you are not getting any closer, don't stop trying—instead, try in another way. It is said that "smart people do not do different things, but they do things differently." In some cases, we might be heading in the wrong direction, and that's when we need to change our style. However, the main goal is to not stop trying because you never know how close you are to achieving your goals. Never give up. The city of Hawley provides a vibrant illustration of this principle.

The beautiful city of Hawley, which serves as a bedroom community for the metropolitan city of Fargo-Moorhead in northwest Minnesota, came up with an

extraordinary idea of putting solar panels at each of its community entrances (to offer a "warm welcome" to all the commuters). The whole idea of the solar panel was clear-cut and efficacious: The city would use a solar panel and LED lights to light up the welcome board. Solar power being the ultimate renewable source of energy and LED being very energy efficient made a great combination. Undoubtedly, this is the best possible feasible mechanism of practicing sustainability from a sustainable point of view. When it came time to request a grant and gain approval from the state, the city stayed very optimistic because it thought there was no reason to not approve such a neat project.

On the contrary, to Hawley's surprise, the project did not get approved. What choices did the city of Hawley have other than to apply again? It applied again and got rejected for the second time. With all positive attitudes, the city applied for the third time—and, yet again, faced rejection. What was the reasoning behind this? According to the state, the welcome board that Hawley was proposing may, indeed, distract the commuters: it might shine in their eyes and lead to accident which would otherwise have not occurred at all.

What would you expect from the city of Hawley after being denied three times, consecutively? I am afraid I might have to disagree what most of us think the city would do. The people of Hawley were very frustrated, but they didn't let their frustration stop them. Lisa Jetvig, the city clerk treasurer of Hawley, said, "We were really frustrated, and it's so annoying to get rejected again and again." Nonetheless, the city did not give up in spite of the triple rejection. Instead, the community

thought of a new approach than the usual process and adopted a different mechanism to achieve its goals, and it had someone from GreenStep Cities help with the whole process. Hawley invited the state officer to investigate the plot where it was planning to put up the welcome board. Upon inspecting the plot, the officer did not find anything wrong with the location, and nor did the welcome board present commuters with any particular risk of distraction. After this, the state approved Hawley's proposal and the project began right away without any delay. Consequently, the city of Hawley now has a really nice welcome board—the first one like it in northwest Minnesota.

Would Hawley have that eye-catching and sustainably innovated welcome board if it had given up after a few trials? The answer is, most certainly, no. Would it try again if it failed the fourth time? Apparently, the answer is yes, because the community believed in the feasibility and effectiveness of its improvement. Moreover, the people maintained optimistic attitudes and believed in themselves.

What is the take-home lesson from this interesting story? Never give up: keep trying because you never know how close you are to your goal. Most importantly, it's not only about the welcome board: this principle is something we can apply to everything in our life to achieve our goals.

Findings:

Through the entire project in 7 counties, 14 towns/cities were visited, 29 different individuals were interviewed, 4 presentations were given, and lots of online research has

been done. There are quite interesting scenarios that were discovered during the entire project. However, the important part of the project was to figure out why the communities in northwest Minnesota are not so aware of GreenStep Cities—or, in a broader perspective, about sustainability. What might be the possible reasons or any obstacles, if any? Lots of interesting reasons floated on the surface after interactions with different individuals from different fields within different communities. It is impossible to keep track of all the challenges because they are so varied, and some that make sense for one community will not make sense for others. However, the common, plausible, and tough challenges we found from most of the communities are highlighted and diagnosed. Consequently, the prime reason was because most of the communities are rural and they are not well aware of sustainability: most of them are quite conservative. Moreover, below are the some of the common barriers that explain why the communities of northwest Minnesota are having a hard time becoming GreenStep Cities.

➢ The requirements of GSC are confusing for some communities. They think GSC need to be more clear on requirements (what EXACTLY they need to do).

➢ Most of the towns were concerned about the requirement for a GreenStep Coordinator. They were worried it might require excessive commitment.

➢ Apparently, most of the communities were concerned about time requirements/staff time.

➢ Some cities/towns have lots of important projects to focus on, so they think GSC is not a top priority at the moment.

➢ Some of them like it, but only if it makes economic sense.

➤ Very few communities were frank and stated they don't like "green" and don't consider themselves to be "green."

Recommendation for CURA:

CURA has done a tremendous job in helping communities of Minnesota become better, healthier, more resilient, and more sustained than ever before. It has offered a very wide prospect to enhance the capacity of communities of Minnesota to meet their goals by assisting them with relevant applied projects. However, from the experiences assembled by interacting with different communities and individuals from northwest Minnesota, there are a few recommendations to CURA to make its efforts more efficacious, productive, and feasible. It would be a great support if CURA expands and funds more similar projects with the focus of community development—for instance, sustainability. In addition, if CURA opens these kinds of research opportunities for students from all over the state, that would be a great learning opportunity for the students who are the future of Minnesota. Moreover, extra advertisements regarding the opportunities that CURA offers definitely would acknowledge the rural communities, individuals, and eventually the students about this wonderful program and tie them together with same goal to improve the communities of Minnesota.

Conclusion:

It is crystal clear that all the communities seek development regarding infrastructure, businesses, schools, libraries, parks and so on. However, it is devastating that people really

don't understand the importance of sustainability, or they have tenacity to underestimate the potential of sustainability. If they were well educated and aware of the essence of sustainability or even just the minor benefits from practicing sustainability, like cost savings and energy use reduction practices, they would be more sustainability-oriented. However, if some of the obstacles or barriers they had could be overcome, then most of the communities of northwest Minnesota would be very driven to be sustained with involvement in GreenStep Cities and the implementation of the 28 proven best practices that are cost-effective and reduce energy use.

Appendix:

How to plant more trees with money???

From a technical standpoint, it is impossible to plant trees with money; we need seeds, of course, to plant trees. However, from an economic standpoint, it is possible to do so: a lot of things can be done with money, planting trees being but one out of many. Likewise, while money does not necessarily "grow" in trees, trees can provide things that money cannot buy. The question is, how do we use money to grow trees? While time and technical innovation continue to improve the answer to this question, the city of Dilworth has already begun an effective system of turning money into trees.

Recently, the city of Dilworth has completed some great tree plantation programs. The city received a grant of $7,000 for planting trees along Highway 10. In addition, it received a tremendous number of volunteer hours from community members. Through a project known as the "Burification Project," completed last year, the community reportedly planted more than 50 trees along the busy highway.

How did this happen? Dilworth has enacted some very impressive and interesting incentives to encourage tree plantation. For every new house, the city provides a $500 allowance for planting boulevard trees along the street. All homeowners have to do is go to the nursery and pick up trees. The nursery will invoice the city office, and the city will pay for the trees. People are very enthusiastic about this program, and it is achieving excellent results. In the words of Ken L. Parke, the city administrator of Dilworth, "You can't beat it." In addition to the cost of trees, the $500 also covers labor to plant, staking the tree, fertilizer, and any other costs that come with the tree plantation—up to the $500 maximum. According to Ken, on average, Dilworth sees around 15 houses built every year in the city, and on average, each house plants 2 trees. Simple math, then, indicates that the city will have approximately 30 new trees each year.

Newcomers to the community have 2 years to think about planting trees after the house is built; after 2 years, the $500 incentive expires. However, Ken doesn't see any reason to miss this opportunity and claims that almost everyone takes advantage of this unique incentive.

According to Lucy Larcom, "He who plants a tree plants hope." In a similar manner, the city of Dilworth is not only planting trees, but planting hope in its community: The hope of fresher air and a clean environment. It is planting the hope of becoming a more beautiful, greener, and healthier city. It is the responsibility of every citizen to make their city healthier, greener, and prettier. You don't have to do a lot: All you have to do is plant trees.

References:

Minnesota GreenStep Cities. (2012). Implementation of Proven Best Pracitces. Retrieved

from http://greenstep.pca.state.mn.us/