

## Building a More Sustainable Future in Wisconsin:

### Findings and Recommendations from the 2010 Sustainable Communities Public Policy Forum



## Executive Summary

The current severe fiscal challenge facing local governments presents an opportunity to re-imagine how Wisconsin communities look and function. Communities moving beyond the traditional “silo” approach to problem solving will create solutions that simultaneously address economic, social and environmental challenges while building on unique local assets and resources.

To collect and synthesize ideas about this approach, the University of Wisconsin-Extension and UW Colleges hosted the Sustainable Communities Public Policy Forum in spring 2010. This was part of the Wisconsin Idea Forum series focusing University of Wisconsin System resources on the state’s most vexing problems.

More than 700 people participated through six regional roundtables, a subsequent two-day conference and a follow-up survey. They identified current policies and resources viewed as either supporting or hindering community sustainability efforts around the state. They also contributed policy ideas to strengthen existing efforts.

Many Wisconsin communities already are engaged in various approaches to promote sustainability. These range from community-based approaches aligned with international sustainability frameworks, such as The Natural Step, to more narrowly focused state-level approaches, such as Wisconsin’s “25 x ’25” renewable energy goal.

The breadth and depth of a local sustainability agenda depends on the community’s overall priorities and level of commitment. Successful local sustainable

development efforts are characterized by strong political leadership, a shared understanding of the benefits of sustainability and strategies to achieve those benefits. The defining characteristics of sustainability policy and practice include a focus on place, holistic outlook, acceptance of limits, long-term perspective and active involvement in problem solving.

Communities need new approaches, policies and sets of actions to accelerate the transition to a more sustainable society and more sustainable local communities. Communities will start from different places and with varied goals, assets and political leadership. A positive and compelling vision of the future can provide a sense of direction and shape local actions. Armed with this vision, communities will discover they can control many aspects of their future.

The policy ideas and recommendations generated through the Sustainable Communities Public Policy Forum provide a solid foundation for continuing to develop and implement local and state policies that support community sustainability. These recommendations have been synthesized and sorted into six policy areas. In the full report, each policy area section includes an introductory description, an explanation of its importance, summaries of what participants indicate promotes or hinders community sustainability, and brief descriptions of policy recommendations they identified and prioritized. The recommendations are summarized here.

**The report was developed by the University of Wisconsin-Extension Sustainability Team, which can be contacted through [sustainability@uwsuper.edu](mailto:sustainability@uwsuper.edu). The complete report is posted at [www.capacitycenter.org](http://www.capacitycenter.org)**

The following items are prioritized policy recommendations. They do not represent a coordinated agenda for comprehensively addressing the challenge of building more sustainable communities. They are meant to be informative rather than prescriptive and to aid discussion about the wide variety of policy ideas that can be used to move the state forward sustainably.

### Economic Development Policies Encouraging More Local Production and Consumption

- Support community supported agriculture, farmers' markets, food shares, community gardens and comprehensive local food systems.
- Provide financial support and incentives for the production and purchase of locally produced goods and services.
- Develop and follow standards for "buy local" purchasing for materials, supplies, food items, etc.
- Level the financial and decision-making playing field through the use of metrics that reflect social and ecological costs and benefits as well as economic costs and benefits.
- Expand recycling markets.

### Policies Promoting More Sustainable Patterns of Land Use and Urban Form

- Revise zoning codes, subdivision regulations and other tools that affect the physical form of communities to create more sustainable physical design.
- Promote high density downtowns and creative design for enhanced mobility of people.
- Revise zoning codes to allow for food production within municipalities.
- Develop enforceable urban growth boundaries or other mechanisms to limit expansion of cities and villages, while encouraging higher densities and mixed land uses within those jurisdictions.

- Create new infrastructure for alternative fuel vehicles, including electric vehicles.
- Require an independent analysis of new development that projects, over the long term, the costs of that development to the affected municipalities in tax burden, cost of services, replacement/cost of infrastructure, traffic impact and impact on ecosystem services.
- Identify incentives for communities to work together.
- Promote systems of trails within and between communities.

### Policies Improving Government Leadership on Sustainability and Sustainable Decision Making

- Provide education and incentives for local elected officials, staff and the general public to increase their awareness and knowledge of community sustainability issues and opportunities.
- Encourage communities to adopt sustainability principles and decision-making frameworks to guide policy development.
- Develop requirements for all community-owned facilities and fleets to become more energy efficient and increase their use of renewable energy.
- Require community infrastructure to be built to sustainable or green standards.
- Provide state incentives to support local government sustainability efforts.



### Policies Promoting Sustainability Education and Local Engagement

- Provide sustainability education, leadership development, networking and support for local elected officials and staff.
- Provide a clearinghouse of relevant resources and model practices related to community sustainability as guidance for local decision makers.
- Promote and support K-12 school policies, programs, standards, requirements, professional development, funding and education based on sustainability values and principles, and provide meaningful opportunities for youth involvement in community sustainability projects.
- Promote and support the provision of community education and educational materials related to community sustainability as a means to developing effective and informed community engagement and involvement.
- Develop policies supported by related measures and quantifiable metrics as a means to bring about desired behavior change in support of sustainability.
- Ensure that existing sustainability resources remain available and are fully utilized.

### Policies Leading to More Sustainable Transportation Systems and Regional Cooperation

- Prioritize and invest in public transit.
- Provide less structured and more efficient transit options.
- Promote regional transit systems and policies.
- Provide safer routes and better connections to encourage neighborhood electric and other low-speed vehicle use.
- Develop better bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure and connections.

Photos, left and on cover, by Donald S. Abrams



### Policies Encouraging Clean Energy, Water Conservation and Waste Reduction

- Remove subsidies of fossil fuels to level the playing field for renewable energy.
- Support small scale and distributed technologies.
- Develop local renewable energy and energy efficiency programs.
- Update local ordinances to encourage energy conservation.
- Encourage storm water utilities to be more proactive in promoting conservation practices including pervious pavements, rain barrels and rain gardens.
- Increase the amount of renewable energy generated in the state.
- Encourage more sustainable waste management systems.
- Create local markets for local products.
- Create a clearinghouse of sustainability practices, policies and applied research.
- Prioritize and invest in programs that reduce nonpoint source pollution on agricultural lands to reduce phosphorous and other contaminant runoff.
- Reward communities that implement voluntary sustainability programs.