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USDN Sustainability Innovation Report
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Figuring Out "Sustainable Consumption"

Sustainable consumption... What is it? How do you measure it? What can you do about it?

A team of USDN members—***Eugene***, ***Houston***, ***Iowa City***, ***Portland OR***, ***San Jose***, ***Seattle***, and ***Vancouver BC***—set out to answer these questions, using a USDN Innovation Fund grant to hire Cascadia Consulting to conduct research and develop an explanatory framework that could inform and guide urban sustainability directors. The focus of the research is on three sustainable consumption topics—repair, reuse, and sharing—and consumption choices at the individual or household levels, rather than government or business purchasing.

The project is still in the early "discovery phase," but excerpts from an initial framing by the consultants, based on a literature search, provide some definitions and distinctions:

- **Repair** involves fixing or mending worn or damaged items to restore them to good, working condition and extend their useful life. Though repair may be a part of reuse/resale activities, this sector is focused on repair that does not involve transfer of ownership. A closely related concept is maintenance—regular or ongoing upkeep to preserve items in a state of good repair and function. Examples include do-it-yourself efforts (e.g., mending clothes, home repair, fixing items through online support or instructions), hiring or bartering with others for repairs, repair businesses (e.g., cars, appliances, electronics, shoes), or community repair cafes or workshops.
- **Reuse** entails the repeated use of items or parts of items that still have usable aspects. Reuse can be in the same form and function, or items may be repurposed into a different form and use, as an alternative to throwing away materials (or traditional recycling) — also known as "upcycling." Though reuse may also involve repair or sharing, this sector is focused on redistribution markets—that is, resale or transfer of ownership (including giving away or trading items). Examples include thrift shops, rummage sales, Craigslist, Freecycle, eBay, building material reuse stores, used cars or auto-part salvage yards, and existing construction (such as sale of "used" homes).
- **Sharing**, **Borrowing**, and **Rental** involve having more than one user of a given resource or space, for pay or free, without a transfer of ownership. Sharing: The joint use of a resource or space. A definition of the sharing economy as "an economic model based on sharing underutilized assets from spaces to skills to stuff for monetary or non-monetary benefits." Borrowing: Receiving a resource temporarily, with the expectation of returning it (also has financial connotations of a monetary loan). Rental or lease: Paying for the temporary use of a resource or space. Broadly, these activities may be considered as part of a "collaborative economy," which includes production, consumption, finance, and education. Examples include direct peer-to-peer sharing (informal sharing with neighbors or friends), peer sharing facilitated through a company or organization (e.g., Craigslist, airBNB, Lyft), and business-to-consumer rentals (e.g., Zipcar, Netflix, citiBike). More traditional forms of for-profit rental or lease (such as hotels, car rental, car and property leases) are not typically considered "collaborative"—a potential distinction between "new" vs. traditional forms of sharing, borrowing, and rental.

Using these three definitions, the consultants also have developed an initial matrix of sustainable consumption activities in different products/services of the urban economy: transportation; media, information, music, movies, games, and books (physical and digital); clothing, shoes, and accessories; tools and appliances; sporting equipment and toys; furniture; building materials; food; accommodation, lodging, and housing; and "intangibles": time, skills, child care, bartering, errand networks, local "currencies" or community "hours," and other exchanges of time, services, or skills.

Stay tuned for the final report later this year.