

## Engaging the Community, One Sector at a Time

**What do Greenovate Boston, Sustainable Cleveland 2019, and Sustainable DC have in common? Sector-focused engagement programs with strong strategies and replicable designs.**

In March 2015, representatives from Boston, Cleveland, and Washington DC gathered in Boston for a USDN Peer Learning Exchange on community engagement. All three cities recently developed comprehensive climate action or sustainability plans that recognized the importance of community action. Each city has a robust community engagement effort underway, but they are each excelling in different areas – i.e., ambassador programs, summits, and CEO-level engagement.

The exchange strengthened the participants' understanding that a comprehensive community engagement approach is multi-pronged. It also showcased the best practices of each approach. Lengthy discussions were critical to gaining the necessary level of knowledge about each city's efforts, including the unique circumstances leading to their success. For example, Boston was able to take advantage of the Barr Foundation's leadership in forming the Green Ribbon Commission, and Cleveland was able to turn to the Fowler Center for Sustainable Value at Case Western Reserve University to facilitate its Sustainability Summits. Nevertheless, with ample discussion opportunity at the Peer Learning Exchange, each city was able to take away many customizable lessons to improve their own community engagement efforts.

**Cleveland's Neighborhood Grants Program**

To fund climate-related community improvement projects, Sustainable Cleveland and the Cleveland Climate Action Fund are piloting community workshops in six neighborhoods. At the workshops, residents learn how climate is affecting the Cleveland region. Participants then hear about other neighborhood-level projects and are led through an exercise in which they map their neighborhood's strengths and needs and identify potential community improvement projects related to climate change. After developing a project proposal, participants are able to submit it for funding.

Why does it work, and how do they do it? Recommendations include:

- **Linking Community Funding to the Bigger Picture:** Funding for community improvement projects is both rare and powerful. Use the funding as an opportunity to educate residents on existing plans, goals, and work already being done, and require them to link their community work to current sustainability initiatives and priorities. Instead of funding a one-off project, their work will align with larger-scale initiatives, which can be an empowering experience. It also shows the community that the government values residents' participation in implementation of community plans.
- **Connecting to the Positive:** By holding a workshop or asking residents to use guides to identify strengths as well as needs, participants focus on the assets of their community, not just the problems.
- **Growing Big Supporters through Small Grants:** Grants are an opportunity to bring new people into the climate conversation and to start developing strong relationships with neighborhoods under positive circumstances – and they don't need to be large to be effective. Cleveland's grants are up to \$5,000, which is enough to attract considerable interest and fund useful projects. Residents begin to feel more ownership of climate and sustainability planning and become part of the solution.
- **Broadening and Strengthening Concepts of Sustainability and Climate:** Funding a range of project types also helps people connect sustainability to a much broader universe of sustainability (health, food, safety) and brings climate solutions closer to home (like tree planting or flood prevention).
- **Getting Help:** Grant programs are an administrative heavy lift. Get a community partner or contractor to administer grants. Working with a community partner with strong roots in a variety of neighborhoods increases the chance of project success and helps ensure diverse participation.
- **Finding New Funding Sources:** Cleveland has a unique program that allows individuals or neighborhood groups to cover travel, production, and other activities by offsetting their carbon emissions through payments to the Cleveland Climate Action Fund. This allows them to participate, and in time, it should create a reliable funding stream for community projects.

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**Boston's Green Ribbon Commission**

The mission of the Green Ribbon Commission (GRC) is to convene leaders from Boston's key sectors to support the outcomes of the city's Climate Action Plan. The GRC has been extremely successful in raising funds for sustainability projects, gaining executive-level buy-in of the plan and related programs, and building social and political capital for Greenovate Boston. The Commission plays three important roles in advancing the regional vision for climate action by:

1. Advising the city on the implementation of its Climate Action Plan;
2. Engaging sector leadership to align their assets and initiatives with the plan; and
3. Highlighting and promoting climate action best practices within and across sectors

Why does it work, and how do they do it? Recommendations include:

- *Prioritizing Financial and Staff Support:* A key aspect of Boston's GRC is strong financial support from foundations, which is used partly to fund critical staff, including the Executive Director. The funding also pays community organizations to staff each of the working groups, which provides the capacity to produce reports.
- *Recruiting Participants with an Initial Invitation from the Mayor:* Nearly every invitation from Mayor Menino was accepted, and participation on the Commission is still strong.
- *Requiring Executive Level, "C-Suite" Participation, But Only for the Right Things:* GRC allows no option for an executive member to be represented by other staff. If they don't attend, no one from their organization attends. This prevents executives from not attending because they are concerned that only junior staff from other organizations will be at meetings. On the flip side, Boston has found that the best use of executives' time is decision-making (not policy development, logistics, or running the meeting itself).
- *Recognizing that Informality Is a Strength:* Boston's GRC isn't a city-run program, and it isn't an incorporated non-profit organization. Instead, it is really just a voluntary network of participants. This informality allows it to be much more fluid in its role and work with a wider variety of partners and processes.
- *Using Social Capital as Currency:* Engaging influential leaders in a variety of public and private sectors (including health, higher education, business, and state government) builds considerable social capital that the GRC is able to leverage. Executives can call other executives to build support for new policy or publicly support a new city campaign.
- *Ensuring Continuity between Leadership Transitions:* One of the most difficult disruptions a city sustainability initiative can experience is a change in mayoral leadership, which is particularly challenging if the sustainability plan is closely associated with the outgoing mayor. Mayor Menino launched Greenovate Boston and was closely aligned with it, but the strong leadership of the Green Ribbon Commission enabled the project to continue under new city leadership. GRC leaders met with mayoral candidates during the campaign, making it clear that climate was a priority for them. When Mayor Walsh started his administration, Greenovate Boston was able to continue seamlessly.

**Washington DC's Ambassador Program**

The purpose of the Sustainable DC Ambassadors program is to engage residents from a wide variety of backgrounds (e.g., geographic, racial, topic interest) to talk to their peers about the importance and benefits of sustainability. In essence, the ambassadors serve as an extension of the sustainability office. They attend community events and meetings, answer questions, and explain to citizens how they can get involved. As a result, this program creates sustainability champions, establishes trusted messengers in community outreach (i.e., not government employees), and allows for much broader community engagement.

Why does it work, and how do they do it? Recommendations include:

- *Understanding Ambassador Motivations:* In order to recruit and retain ambassadors, it is crucial to understand why they would want to volunteer. Sustainable DC has found that volunteers are motivated by the opportunity to build their social capital – by being part of a special group that aligns with their individual passions. Accordingly, it is important to celebrate and reward them with personal invitations to events and special programs. There is an application process to select ambassadors, which brings home the message that being selected is an honor.

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## Washington DC's Ambassador Program (cont'd)

Why does it work, and how do they do it? Recommendations include:

- **Instituting Two-Way Communications:** Over time, ambassadors have become an important conduit for Sustainable DC to get initial community input. Because ambassadors are chosen to reflect the diversity of DC, they also serve as a committed focus group to test advertising campaigns, brand adjustments, new outreach programs, and more. Their input is valuable, and they are made to feel valued.
- **Communicating Clear Expectations:** For all parties involved, the clearer the roles and responsibilities are, the more successful the program. The initial commitment for Sustainable DC ambassadors is eight months, and each ambassador is required to attend at least one community event per month. Goals are clear: ambassadors know what is expected of them and so aren't frustrated by vague goals or outcomes.
- **Developing Strategic Training:** In order to set clear expectations and prepare volunteers to engage the community, Sustainable DC has found that training is necessary - even though it is clear that ambassadors are not government representatives and that they do not have to have all the answers. All ambassadors must attend a three-hour training session where they meet their cohorts and learn about:
  - The Sustainable DC Plan and ongoing projects
  - Volunteer duties and activities
  - Expectations of ambassador interactions with members of the public (which includes demonstrations and role play)
  - FAQs on Sustainable DC and what it means for community members from all walks of life
  - How residents can take action
  - Program logistics
- **Making It Easy:** Over time, Sustainable DC has found that while volunteers do not feel confined to events in their neighborhood, they also prefer not to seek out events on their own, and they would like to avoid coordinating logistics. Therefore, the program is structured to be as convenient as possible, so ambassadors can focus on interacting with residents. As an example, ambassadors are provided with a t-shirt and an easy-to-carry toolkit that they can take with them on public transportation or by bike.

USDN members can read the full report to learn about all the best practices in sectoral engagement from these three communities [here](#).