

Urban Sustainability Innovator Profile: David Driskell

David Driskell is the Executive Director of Community Planning and Sustainability for the City of Boulder. He's learned that asking lots of questions (including ones about his own sanity) puts him on the right track to transforming his community's energy future.

What aspect of your job do you have the most fun with? What are some current projects you are excited about? In my position, I oversee a range of city services including planning, energy services, zero waste, economic vitality, and development review. The sustainability-related parts of my job are what I'm most excited about, including things like implementing [Boulder Junction](#), a 160 acre transit-oriented area of redevelopment, as well as integrating affordable housing in areas of new development.

What's one of your primary focuses right now? In Boulder, a lot of our sustainability work right now is focused on municipalizing our electric utility. As a community, we are trying to change our energy source – with the current reliance on coal, we can't make a meaningful dent in our emissions unless we tackle this. We started this process by focusing on energy efficiency, establishing stringent local energy codes and requiring all existing rental housing to meet efficiency requirements. But our analyses showed that even by requiring or incentivizing millions in efficiency investments, we weren't going to come close to meeting our emission reduction goals. While we continue to work on energy efficiency, our focus has shifted to figuring out how to achieve a fundamental shift in our power supply. And that analysis has led us to focus on opportunities for local, distributed generation using renewable resources, coupled with a pretty significant rethinking of the utility business model. Our aim is to create an energy system that is not only decarbonized, but also decentralized and democratized.

The [Carbon Neutral Cities Alliance](#) is a new group currently in their first round of issuing grant awards. As a founding member of the Alliance, can you describe in your own words the goal of the Alliance? The goal is to get a small group of people in the room who are trying to push the envelope on deep carbon reductions. It's mostly cities with strong political consensus to take bold action, and they are willing to sink resources into achieving carbon reduction. Getting to 80% reduction is more audacious than anything else we've taken on before. By participating in the Alliance, we are in the room with other people who deeply understand how hard this will be.

Have you gained any interesting insights through your experience participating in CNCA? Boulder began focusing on energy municipalization four years ago. Throughout that time I've often asked people: "Are we crazy?" In the beginning, I was concerned we were listening to the activists too much. But now this conversation is mainstream in Boulder; the whole community is talking about the utility of the future, and a similar conversation is happening at the national level, too, including in the utility industry. Through the Alliance, we are now part of an international team committed to the same goals, and engaged in similar conversations. To be honest, it's incredibly reassuring. It helps keep me going. I am connected to a larger movement of people working towards the same end.

Do you have any hard lessons to share? Boulder has plenty of warts. Certainly one huge challenge is that we've become a very expensive community to live in, making housing affordability a big deal. We've done inclusionary zoning, which created thousands of permanently affordable units - yet we know this isn't enough. Another aspect of being a wealthy community that is we grapple with excess consumption. Coming up with solutions to these challenges will make municipalization look easy.

Many communities look to Boulder for an indicator of where urban sustainability is going. Are there any unsung wins from Boulder that contribute to this success? One of the big learnings is about organizational structure. By linking the community planning function with our sustainability programs, we've been able to create an integrated group that brings together the skill sets of our planners, related to policy analysis and public outreach, with the change-agent attitudes and approaches of our sustainability staff. Putting sustainability here has helped to significantly advance our work in areas like zero waste, energy and integrated pest management, while also positively influencing important planning areas - like capital planning, development review and transportation. Before, we had a sustainability professional working on carbon reductions in the transportation sector, sitting in a separate division, with limited collaboration. Now they are working as one team. This has helped us get past sustainability being seen as a 3 year special project.

Do you have any parting thoughts to share? I have found USDN to be a fantastic professional resource. I've been a city planner for a long time, and have had mixed experiences with various professional associations. Huge conferences with 6,000 people, a bunch of PowerPoints, and 3 questions at the end is not useful. USDN Annual Meetings are very productive. Each time, I come back with new thinking and new relationships. It's clear the members are driving the agenda, and the funders are there to support that. It's a powerful model for supporting change at the local level while building a national body of practice.