

**Urban Sustainability Innovator Profile:
Jo Zientek**

Jo Zientek is the Deputy of Environmental Services for San Jose CA - the 10th largest city in the United States. She discusses support of emerging technologies, embracing smart technology, and job training partnerships for event greening.

What is the most pressing thing you are working on right now?

Jo: We have a huge problem with illegal dumping, which can be anything from straight garbage to old furniture to hazardous waste. We have even had problems with fake disposal companies who charge people to collect their waste then just dump around the corner. We were just asked to kick start an initiative to research why this is happening and to make recommendations to address it. For example, one of the strategies we are exploring now is the Solid Waste Association of North America's award-winning illegal dumping application. (To learn about this app, reference the marketing and communications award section [here](#).)

Are there any best practices from San Jose that your peers might not be aware of?

Jo: We do a lot with greening big events in the city. To do this work, we have a long-standing relationship with the [San Jose Conservation Corp](#) (SJCC), a non-profit organization focused on providing disadvantaged young men and women with academic education, hands-on learning, and development of basic skills. For events like the San Jose Jazz Festival, we work with the SJCC to design and install educational signage about waste reduction during the event. Together, we create public service announcements for green event features, like water bottle refilling stations or solar energy powering music stages. We are also doing a lot at our new soccer stadium for the San Jose Earthquakes, such as audience engagement activities and media during the game and outside of the venue.

One of your top priorities is to use city-owned infrastructure as a testing bed for emerging green technology. Can you talk about the context that this idea was born from and provide more detail on why it's important?

Jo: San Jose was the first city to approve a green technology demonstration policy. We created it because research institutions like NASA and various private companies frequently approached us wanting to partner to test and demonstrate their technology. The problem was that we did not have a process to engage them. Every time they approached us, we had a bureaucratic freeze. So we created the [framework for establishing demonstration partnerships](#) that Council adopted in June 2008. A key point of the framework is to talk to legal and procurement to determine if the desired initiative is sole source or will require a competitive procurement process. We also created a whole new procurement category of emerging technology that allows us to purchase and demonstrate green technology before it's commercially available. For example, in our garbage contract we include a requirement that the provider be willing to test emerging technologies, like electric garbage trucks. The framework and policy helps us support innovation, while mitigating the legal risk to the city.

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You've participated in several USDN Innovation Fund Grant projects: the Compostable Plastics Toolkit, New Waste Technologies Scan, and the Sustainable Consumption work. Do you have any insights from these projects?

Jo: I like working with people I can learn from. When I worked with Houston on the New Waste Technologies project, I was impressed with how well Laura Spanjian ran things and how effective she was in moving her initiative forward given the context of her community - and with no budget! I get stuck in the California bubble and seeing another big city make a big, heavy lift amidst tricky circumstances provided great perspective for me.

You are participating in the USDN Equity and Access User Group. Can you share any updates from your time in this group?

Jo: We just had a presentation about indicators of equity issues in neighborhoods from an Oakland-based group, the [Urban Strategies Council](#). I learned that illegal dumping is an indicator of a neighborhood that may have equity issues. The presentation was great timing for me: it is informing the illegal dumping assessment that I am working on. Outside of that specific lesson, I've learned equity needs to be included in everything and that marketing it is very important to engage people who may not respond if you call it an equity issue.

Why is San Jose participating in the Innovation Fund Smart Cities project? Why is this topic important to you?

Jo: The big pressing issue is getting information from the neighborhoods back to the city, so we can figure out infrastructure needs. How do we get information out of the field and effectively routed to the right place in the city?

Can you share a piece of advice for recently hired sustainability directors?

Jo: Take time to be in the field. Especially if you are new, because now is the time to learn before your calendar fills up. If you have a theoretical background, nothing can replace walking through a homeless camp with a police officer. It is very different than discussing homelessness at a dinner party. Get out in the community, and think about how its design and operations impact the residents. Go to the call center and listen to what residents are actually saying. Cut through the synthesis your colleagues give you, and make your own judgments on community strengths and weaknesses.