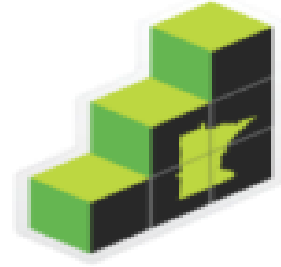


# Minnesota GreenStep Cities Program

➤ **Best Practice Action 24.1:** *Use a committee to lead, coordinate, and report to and engage community members on implementation of sustainability best practices.*



## BACKGROUND

The GreenStep Cities program aims to provide Minnesota cities a clear pathway to greater sustainability and resiliency based upon implementing best practices specific to Minnesota cities of differing sizes and capabilities. GreenStep cities adopt a participation resolution that names a contact person to be the city's GreenStep coordinator. This person can be an existing city staff person, an elected official or an appointed community member.

Cities are encouraged to empower an existing or new committee to work with and advise the city's GreenStep coordinator. Most cities find it easier to sustain their GreenStep efforts -- to complete more GreenStep actions faster -- with the help and support of a committee.

Sustainability work within our cities is a long-term process requiring coordination of existing efforts, policy change, behavioral change, and a lot of public education. A committee can help with these tasks and especially work to ensure public education and engagement. In smaller cities, committees that include the public can add the value-rich perspectives of community members to the information-rich perspectives of city staff. Community members also provide long-term consistency on sustainability efforts as elected leadership changes. And committees always provide much-needed expertise and an extra set of hands for projects.

## COMMITTEE STRUCTURE & MEMBERSHIP

A GreenStep committee can be structured in many formal or less formal ways, include a variety of people, and be called by many names – a green team, a city commission, a civic sustainability coalition. Depending on a city's history, capacity and operating norms, the committee can include people from one or more groups in the community. The work of the committee can be folded into an existing group, or be given to a newly created group.

### An existing or new committee can be:

- ✓ a city staff team
- ✓ a civic group
- ✓ a formal city commission, committee, advisory group, task force, inter-governmental group

### A formal city group can include representatives from one, or usually more than one, of the following groups:

- elected officials
- city staff
- community members from:
  - civic groups
  - neighborhood associations
  - religious groups
  - business organizations
  - educational institutions
  - youth/school groups (note: school environmental club members advise 2 youth seats)

## COMMITTEE ROLES & TASKS

Depending on the size of the city and the committee size and type, committees and members typically are charged with a variety of tasks ranging from (1) policy and advising, to (2) community engagement, to (3) hands-on project work. Tasks can include:

- researching past city accomplishments and new ideas
- evaluating existing policy
- responding to city council/staff ideas and requests
- drafting vision and policy statements
- coordinating and harmonizing city departmental / community efforts
- defining, measuring and reporting on outcome measures
- collecting feedback from the community
- educating community members about the city vision and desired outcomes
- engaging residents, businesses and institutions to change their practices to help meet city goals

## TIPS FOR CREATING & MAINTAINING SUCCESSFUL COMMITTEES

The following are a distillation of learnings from GreenStep cities, those who work with GreenStep cities such as the Alliance for Sustainability, and Sustainable Jersey's *Secrets to a Successful Green Team*. Please feel free to contribute your own tips to this list by submitting them to the GreenStep coordinator via <https://greenstep.pca.state.mn.us/contact.cfm>

- **Create a mission statement.** Or maybe you call it a committee charter. Everyone involved should have a clear sense of the purpose, roles and the responsibilities of the group. For example, is the group more of a policy group that makes recommendations to the city council, or is it more of a work group that works directly on community projects? A mission statement may be determined by the city council, or developed as a group exercise with input from diverse interests.
- **Pick strong leaders.** At least one. The committee should have a clearly defined leader, whose role and responsibilities have been determined and documented. Having leaders from both the municipality and the community is particularly effective. If the committee has working groups (subcommittees), appoint a chair for each one.
- **Decide on a leadership succession plan.** Leadership should be shared and future leaders developed so that (1) the leaders do not get stuck with most of the work and (2) the leaders can gracefully bow out after a term of service without compromising the ability of the group to successfully continue.
- **Clarify committee membership, tenure, and think expertise/diversity.** Be clear on who formally, or informally, participates on the committee and how long they are signing up to serve. Consider 3-year staggered terms to facilitate continuity and orderly transitions. Take an honest look at who is on your committee and consider, for example: does the group include staff from more than one city department? Does one city council member serve as a member of a commission? Are there members experienced in energy, green infrastructure, etc., on your group? Does the group reflect the overall demographics (race, income, age, homeowners / renters, etc.) of the city? The more diverse voices at the table, the more robust, authentic and effective your efforts will be.
- **Schedule regular meetings.** If at all possible choose a regular meeting time and stick with it. Creating a yearly meeting schedule and communicating it to members, city staff/city council and the public can make the difference between a successful effort that is recognized by the municipality and public, and one that gets "fit in" when convenient and mostly serves just committee members.

- **Divide the work.** Some committees, especially large ones and ones that meet infrequently, have sub-committees (work groups) to focus on specific topics such as energy, or water, or local businesses in more depth and between full committee meetings. Such work groups typically invite diverse community members, business leaders and others to participate along with formal committee members to broaden the discussion and strengthen connections to the public. It is also helpful -- if your committee does not have the assigned services of a city staff person -- to assign group members simple tasks such as creating agendas, arranging rooms, sending out emails, writing a summary of the important issues/ decisions/ recommendations from meetings, updating spreadsheets, uploading documents, writing communications, etc. This helps decrease leader burnout and enables other group members to take ownership of their roles on the committee.
- **Operate under city authority.** Not a problem if a city council-chartered citizen's commission serves as your GreenStep coordinating body. (Note that Minnesota's open meeting law applies to city-appointed commissions.) But if a civic group is serving this role, work with the city council to be formally recognized as the GreenStep committee for the city. And then regularly report back to the council on your work in the city and with city staff.
- **Clarify decision-making and build strong city connections.** A clearly written and transparent process, such as aiming for consensus but reverting to majority vote as needed, can eliminate power struggles and hurt feelings. And be clear how written committee recommendations flow: for a city commission, do city staff receive them, and/or do they go directly to the city council?
  - Does the committee have access to and receive presentations and assistance from municipal staff or consultants in areas such as planning, engineering, legal matters, purchasing? Does your committee formally interact with other city commissions such as planning, economic development, parks and others so that 'the one hand of city government knows what the other hand is doing?'
  - Maintain rapport with your city's leadership especially before and after City Council or Mayoral elections, when your City Council is setting annual goals and/or when your city gets a new City Manager.
  - Is sustainability and GreenSteps written into the job description of any city staff person working with your committee?
- **Create a yearly work plan.** Ideally your committee will meet once a year in a city council work session, where you can share and discuss a draft work plan with city council members before finalizing work goals for the year. Clarify how your work fits with other city work and city committees and commissions. Include measurable short-term and long-term sustainability goals in your plan. Consider an annual recognition of community sustainability champions. Revisit the plan a couple times a year to assure progress is being made and adequate resources are deployed to achieve success.
- **Communicate, engage, network.** While some committee members are content to evaluate policy, research possible initiatives and measure progress, there should be some members, or members working with city staff, who focus on engaging the public in person, on social media, and in writing: educating the public about sustainability issues and needs; informing the community at large of your green team efforts and engaging them to help out; gathering feedback from the public on community issues; connecting with other city efforts led by civic associations. And learning from the green teams of nearby or similar cities. Rather than creating new stand-alone events, focus on participating in already existing city events, and going to meet with community groups at their events/meetings.

*Note that this document is available at [MnGreenStep.org](http://MnGreenStep.org) on the web page for best practice action 24.1 [click on Implementation Tools]*