

# Minnesota GreenStep Cities & Tribal Nations



**A Green Team's Guide  
to Best Practice 24:**

## **Benchmarks & Community Engagement**

*Best Practice 24: Engage a broad spectrum of community members and stakeholders in identifying and adopting outcome measures for GreenStep and other city sustainability efforts, and continue community engagement through ongoing education, dialogue, and campaigns.*

Action 1: Inclusive and Coordinated Decision Making

Action 2: Communicating Progress on Goals

Action 3: Measuring Outcomes

Action 4: Public Education for Action

Action 5: Planning with a Purpose

Action 6: Engaging the Next Generation

Action 7: Expanding Community Engagement

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**Benchmarks and  
Community Engagement**  
*for green teams*



## What's a Green Team Guide?

Great question! A Green Team Guide takes a deeper dive into best practices from the Minnesota GreenStep Program. It highlights communities that have implemented the best practice in a unique way and gives Green Teams some implementation ideas. The 2020 edition focused on [BP action 1.1 \(B3 Benchmarking\)](#) and [BP 6 \(Comprehensive Plans\)](#). This 2021 Guide tackles [BP 24: Benchmarks and Community Engagement](#).

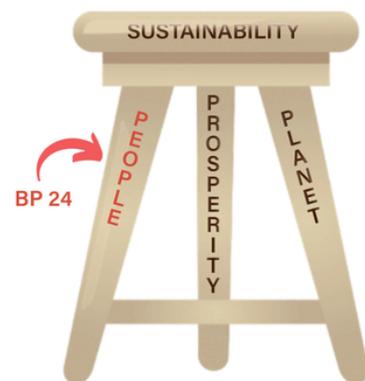
## Why Benchmarks and Community Engagement?

If we want sustainability to be sustainable, then BP 24 is the place to start. When you think BP 24, think PEOPLE!

“People” are one of the three Ps of sustainability: people, planet, and prosperity. (It's in a graphic, so you know it's true. It's also in the American Planning Association's report, [Assessing Sustainability: A Guide for Local Governments](#).)

When people participate in decision-making, they bring information about on-the-ground conditions. That can mean the difference between success and failure of a policy or program. It can also lead to more holistic and innovative solutions to thorny and interwoven challenges.

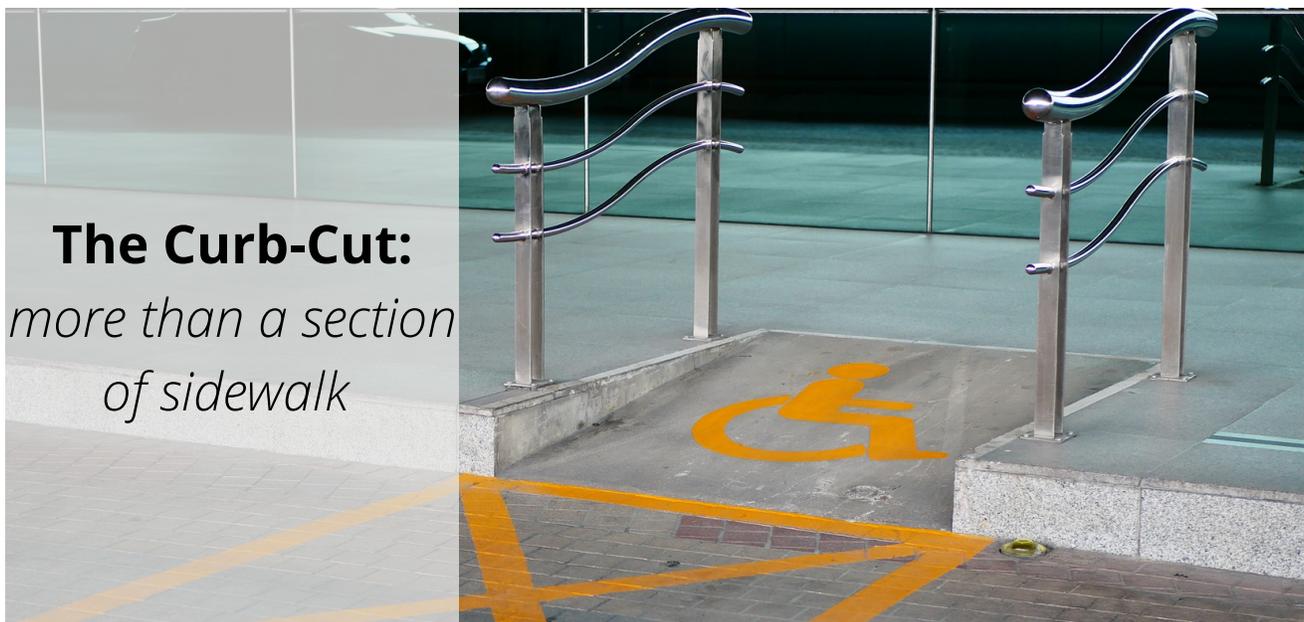
Community members also bring to the table another important component of decision-making: their values. If those values are included, the resulting decisions enjoy greater legitimacy. Finding shared values can help bridge social divisions, and framing sustainability conversations around those shared values helps increase acceptance.



Making sure that community members can engage in a productive way requires that we bring thoughtfulness and intention to designing our processes. This is essential for all to benefit equitably from improvements to community quality of life. Using an equity lens can be helpful for this. (For more information on using an equity lens, see the publications by the [International City and County Managers Association](#) listed in the BP 24.1 Resources section.)

Designing for equity can make the outcomes for all residents better. Everyone is not affected equally by a community crisis, but improving the conditions of those most affected by structural inequity will make our communities better for all, an effect sometimes called the “curb-cut effect.”

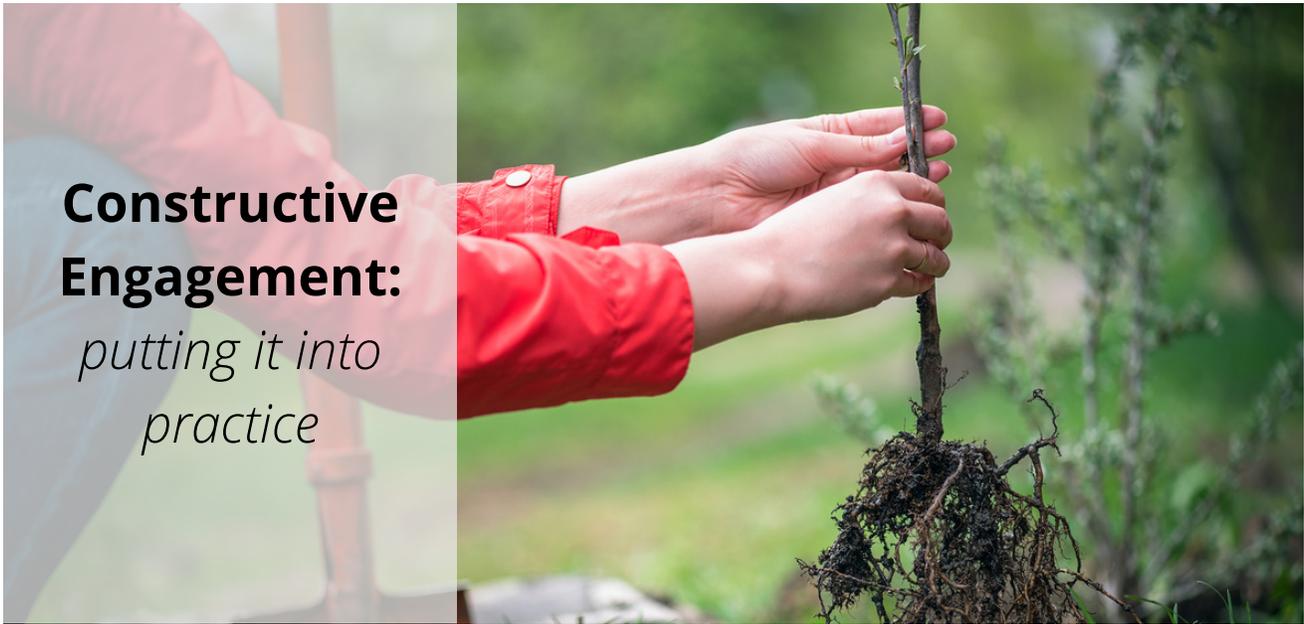
*Sustainability is more sustainable when it reflects community.*



In “[The Curb-Cut Effect](#),” Angela Glover Blackwell describes what happened when curb cuts--the ramps designed to make sidewalks more accessible to people in wheelchairs--became the norm in US cities: “a magnificent and unexpected thing happened. When the wall of exclusion came down, everybody benefited—not only people in wheelchairs. Parents pushing strollers headed straight for curb cuts. So did workers pushing heavy carts, business travelers wheeling luggage, even runners and skateboarders.”

In other words, when we design spaces to make sure that they are accessible to our most vulnerable populations, we all benefit. And it’s not just the physical accessibility of spaces that see this effect; this principle applies to policies, programs, and processes too. In other words, “laws and programs designed to benefit vulnerable groups, such as the disabled or people of color, often end up benefiting all of society.”

So, what kinds of “curb-cuts” could benefit your community?



Pretty much anyone who has worked in local government has their own community engagement “horror story,” leading some to conclude that the answer is to avoid public participation whenever possible.

*Please don't.*

Community engagement can be messy. It can be uncomfortable. It can be frustrating. It can also be breathtaking in its capacity to generate groundbreaking solutions in communities. Sometimes getting to those solutions requires slogging through messy, uncomfortable, and frustrating stages. And sometimes, choosing engagement strategies carefully can help make those stages a little less messy, uncomfortable, and frustrating.

## Ignore? Inform? Defend? Or Host?

Engagement horror stories are often the result of community members' perceptions (sometimes warranted!) that decisions have been made in advance by the powers-that-be. The [International City and County Managers Association](#) describes some of the engagement choices available to local governments when it comes to approaching potentially contentious issues:

*Defensive posturing in community engagement is very costly and can easily be avoided. By utilizing a broader set of tools for online engagement in these circumstances, we come across as more open and available; willing to hear all positions related to a decision. We will be better positioned to provide facts and offer reasoning for decision making because we've allowed all of the ideas and emotions to surface, we've listened—and we've provided an opportunity for the public to do the same. Sometimes the opportunity is all that is needed—by providing it, we remove the perception that we are hiding information or are being driven by ulterior motives—we build trust in our community.*

## **10+1** for Effective Community *Tips* Engagement

**1. Build relationships.** The best time to build relationships is twenty years ago. The second best time is today. (Coincidentally, the same is true of planting trees - see BP 16.) Build relationships with and among diverse segments of your community. Relationships are the ties that hold communities together as they grapple with challenging issues.

**2. Build trust.** Healthy relationships are based on trust. Be a local government that has proven that it can be trusted to be transparent, and to listen and respond effectively to the needs and priorities of residents. (Want to learn more about building trust? Check out [Deloitte Insights Building Trust in Government](#).)

**3. Reduce barriers to engagement.** Use a range of different engagement approaches—in person, phone, online. Schedule meetings in locations and at times that make it easy for diverse segments of the community to attend. Consider providing childcare. Not sure what the barriers are in your community? Ask!

**4. Structure the process carefully.** How you do engagement matters. Sometimes, a big public meeting is not the most effective way to get constructive engagement. Small group processes, one-on-one conversations, or other strategies may be more useful.

**5. Listen.** Try to understand community members' underlying values. For example, values might include independence, resilience, or community solidarity. Speaking to values increases decision legitimacy and spurs win-win solutions to multiple challenges.

**6. Value lived experience.** This is important in many contexts, but perhaps most importantly when it comes to past and present injustices. Pretending injustice doesn't exist won't make it go away.

**7. Think forward.** Lead with questions that invite community members to envision what they would like to see more of in the future. This often helps community members focus on areas of shared value.

**8. Know when you need help.** If a topic is particularly contentious, consider bringing in an outside individual or team who can facilitate the process in an impartial way.

**9. Share data...and share stories.** Data show areas of progress and concern. Stories show why they matter. The best stories help people envision how they, too, can be part of a more inclusive and sustainable community.

**10. Make engagement matter.** To capture the benefits of engagement, you have to connect it with decision making. The most important way to build trust, increase legitimacy of decisions, and show that you value people's time and input is to build what you learn from the engagement into your policies and programs...and then share results!

**Bonus: Every community is unique. Adapt and innovate!**

# **Best Practice Actions:**

*a deeper dive*



**Action 1:**  
*inclusive and  
coordinated  
decision making*

***BP 24.1: Use a city commission or committee to lead, coordinate, report to and engage community members on the identification and equitable implementation of sustainability best practices.***

## 24.1 in Action:

### Rochester's Sustainability and Resiliency Task Force

In 2020 Rochester created a Sustainability and Resiliency Task Force to ensure both meaningful community engagement and coordination across existing commissions and committees. Rochester's website describes this decision in the following way:

*Social equity, environmental stewardship, fiscal responsibility and sustainability are the foundational principles of the City Council and the reason the City is taking action to ensure that the community has a voice in guiding a sustainability and resiliency plan.*

The City of Rochester has created a [Sustainability and Resiliency Task Force](#) whose purpose is to develop and implement a plan with input and guidance from all of Rochester's residents. This task force includes a diverse cross-section of the community to ensure that all voices are represented. Task force members will leverage existing commissions, committees, community organizations and nonprofits to address and implement goals outlined in adopted plans to formulate a community-wide sustainability and community resiliency plan.

[According to Mayor Kim Norton](#), "It's remarkable how just a few simple adjustments to our physical environment or minor changes to our behaviors can result in a substantial positive impact on our environment and on the future of our planet. We all need to do our part in order to assure our children and grandchildren have a safe and secure future. Our youth are asking us to help. I hope the community will join me in doing our part to make certain that their concerns and fears are addressed."

## Why Inclusive and Coordinated Decision Making?

- Prevent burn-out: many hands make light work!
- Ensure that progress continues even if a particular staff person or volunteer leaves.
- Improve effectiveness by coordinating across departments.
- Identify key community needs and concerns, and solutions that address them.
- Increase legitimacy of decisions: people support solutions they have helped craft.
- Affirm the value and advantage of diversity itself.

## Guiding Questions for Inclusive Decision Making

- ❓ Who's at the table? Who's missing? Think beyond the usual suspects.
  - Local government departments? Regional organizations?
  - Elders? Youth? People with a disability?
  - Black, Indigenous, People of Color?
  - New residents or residents who speak different languages?
  - Renters? Landlords? Homeowners? Manufactured home park residents?
  - Large employers? Small businesses? Workers' organizations? Non-profits? Agricultural producers? Educational institutions? Service providers?
- ❓ Is the table accessible? What barriers might people face when they try to participate in decision making? Is the process designed to remove those barriers? Think about meeting location and timing, childcare, stipends for people's time, invitations to underrepresented groups, clear communication, welcoming settings, refreshments. Consider providing orientation or training for potential committee members.
- ❓ Is the table meaningful? Are decisions being made before engagement occurs or does the engagement shape the decisions? For decisions to have legitimacy among community members, make sure they are truly part of the process from the outset.

## Star-Level Examples



A staff green team, or small working group (e.g., city manager, council member, citizen commission chair) exists; city participation in a multi-city/regional green team; annual news article/media to community members referencing GreenStep (& other programs as relevant); city website has a link to city's GreenStep web page & summary of sustainability initiatives. Report city Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion or Human Rights Commissions under BPA 24.7.



A community group, city task force/commission or committee of city staff/officials exists to lead & coordinate sustainability/GreenStep implementation; city has a dedicated sustainability position on city staff that works with the staff &/or community green team/commission. Report annual environmental/sustainability reports to city council under BPA 24.3.



A joint committee of city staff/officials & community members (business, education, religious, etc.) exists & meets regularly; community members on the committee represent the community's racial, economic, abilities, & other diverse representation.

# Resources for Inclusive Decision Making

The [Blandin Community Leadership Program](#) trains leaders from rural Minnesota communities.

The International City and County Managers Association (ICMA) shares resources [“Sustainability Through an Equity Lens, an Introduction.”](#)

ICMA identified 11 leading practices used by communities pursuing sustainability that includes social equity in [“Social Equity and Local Government Sustainability.”](#)

The [Intercultural Cities program](#) is an entry point for assessing diversity and awareness on human rights in your community. You can start with the [Intercultural Citizenship Test](#) and then use the program to learn how diversity is an advantage.

Several University of Minnesota entities came together to create this resource [“Creating a Welcoming Community: A Toolkit to Support Immigrants, Refugees, and BIPOC.”](#) It is free to download.

The [Government Alliance on Race and Equity \(GARE\)](#) is a national network of governments working to achieve racial equity and advance opportunities for all.

Engaging Local Government Leaders (ELGL) offers a 5 part series on [“Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging in Government.”](#)

Additional resources are available on the [Minnesota GreenStep website](#).

**Action 2:**  
*communicating  
progress on goals*



***BP 24.2: Organize goals/outcome measures from all city plans (social, environmental, economic) and report to community members data that show progress toward meeting these goals.***

## 24.2 in Action:

### Duluth's Priority Based Budgeting

Duluth identifies priorities with sustainability woven into them, and then reports progress annually. For this, Duluth uses [Priority Based Budgeting \(PBB\)](#), a methodology that matches community priorities with available resources. The budget document itself identifies how departmental goals and capital expenditures align with the priorities and includes outcome measurements for the prior three years as well as the current budget year.

Duluth began using PBB in December 2017. Then, during the July 2018 Sidewalk Days, the city launched a game to build community engagement into the PBB process. They provided 10 PBB coins to each constituent, who got to allocate those coins to the priorities they thought were most important to the city. In April 2019, they launched a version of the game on the city's website. 800 people participated in just the first 10 days.

As Duluth looks to add equity and inclusion to their priorities, they will leverage their use of PBB and continuous community engagement. Their [2021 Budget Book](#) indicates "racial equity and inclusion touch all of the City's priorities." In 2020, the city hired Mindy Granley as Sustainability Officer. [Granley confirmed](#), "Whether you're interested in saving money and resources over time, protecting open space, or building a more resilient economy, sustainability is about aiming to provide a high quality of life in a community for all of its residents."

## Why Communicate Progress on Goals?

- Transparency. Accountability. Ongoing engagement.
- Advance community resilience and quality of life by letting citizens know what the targets are, if they are being met, and how they can help.
- Engaging community members in performance management requires reporting progress. This creates a data-driven decision making process that lends credibility to government and adds value to the community.
- Reporting progress is more than a statement of workload measures (such as light bulbs replaced). Start by understanding the goals of the community. Select, define and report results that are important to the community members.

## Guiding Questions for Communicating Progress

- ? Communicating progress...on what? What are the major goals that have been identified? What was the process through which they were identified? How were community members engaged in identifying those goals? How can this be communicated to community members?
- ? Communicating progress...to whom? Who are our internal and external audiences (stakeholders)? What information will be the most meaningful and useful to our stakeholders?
- ? Communicating progress...how? Are we using multiple media and formats? Think beyond the annual report: blog posts, newspaper, social media, text, graphics, videos, podcasts, radio.
- ? Communicating progress...for what purpose? Are there direct links among goals, communications, and decision making about resource allocation (staff time, budget)?

## Star-Level Examples



Report goals/outcomes annually from plans such as comprehensive, parks, library, housing, stormwater, drinking water, transportation, economic development, energy, sustainability; issue a city [Performance Management Report](#).



Achieve 1 Star rating AND identify specific steps from city departments on how to improve performance or meet goals that were not met in the previous year & incorporate them into the city's updated annual sustainability work plan.



Integrate goals/outcomes reporting explicitly into the city capital improvement planning process, identifying how public dollars are targeted to meeting sustainability goals in the plans.

# Resources for Communicating Progress on Goals

Learn more about [Priority Based Budgeting](#) as used by Duluth, MN.

The National Civic Review devoted an entire issue to the importance of [“Engaging the Public in Local Government Performance Measurement and Reporting.”](#)

PA Times, publication of the American Society for Public Administration shares the importance of planning and reporting in [“Engaging Citizens in Performance Management and Strategic Planning.”](#)

The Governmental Accounting Standards Board (GASB) of the Financial Accounting Standards Board shares guidelines of [Service Efforts and Accomplishments \(SEA\) reporting](#). This methodology has a goal of reporting how well government assesses priorities and then delivers appropriate services.

The American Planning Association provides a guide for local government that defines sustainability, as well as how to implement, measure, and report it called [“Assessing Sustainability: A Guide for Local Governments.”](#)

Additional resources are available on the [Minnesota GreenStep website](#).



## Action 3: *measuring outcomes*

***BP 24.3: Engage community members and partners in identifying, measuring, and reporting progress on key sustainability and social indicators, including energy use/greenhouse gas emissions, social vitality/social inclusion outcome measures.***

### 24.3 in Action: Richfield's Climate Action Plan

In 2020, the [Richfield city council approved a Climate Action Plan](#) with 80 actions, across six focus areas, to be completed in the next five years. Results "will be annually reviewed by the Sustainability Commission, with efforts and achievements presented to the City Council annually as well." From LED streetlights to chicken ordinances, the plan identifies specific actions. City leaders appreciate this. "A lot of climate action plans out there are very big picture, but lacking in specific details," said Councilmember Whalen. "This plan has clear steps and we will know each year if we are succeeding or not at working toward our goal of becoming a more sustainable city." Importantly, equity is a priority. According to Rachel Lindholm, Sustainability Coordinator, "Equity and sustainability are always connected in my mind. If you think about weatherization or energy efficiency it is generally those who can least afford to pay that live in the least efficient housing."

This is reflected in the [climate plan](#): "It is well-known that climate change has and will continue to affect everyone, disproportionately affecting marginalized populations. This includes our elderly, people of color, disabled, non-English speaking, low-income, and immunocompromised friends, family, and neighbors." These efforts build on Richfield's participation in the [Racial Equity Cohort](#) led by the Government Alliance for Race and Equity (GARE). Equity enters into the plan in areas from food access, to urban forests, to energy efficiency. By establishing specific actions (and timelines), the plan lays groundwork for evaluating outcomes in these areas.

## Why Measure Outcomes?

- Without measuring outcomes, it is hard to tell if your efforts are working. Combining “effort” metrics with “effectiveness” metrics helps identify strategies that are working, as well as areas for improvement.
- Meaningful metrics help stakeholders focus future efforts on priorities and gaps.
- Measuring and reporting also help build trust and credibility.
- Communities want to see leadership on the quality of life and resilience issues that matter to them. Measuring outcomes demonstrates that leadership.

## Guiding Questions for Measuring Outcomes

- ? What are we already measuring? Given community members’ priorities, what other information might be useful for informing policy and program design? How are we incorporating equity and environmental justice into our choices about data collection, analysis, and reporting? Do we consider the social distribution of the costs and benefits of policy choices? Remember: lack of policy is still a policy choice.
- ? Are we looking at spatial dimensions of sustainability? Maps are essential here.
- ? Will our data help us measure progress over time on issues of concern to our community? Are we striking the right balance between ease of data collection and meaningfulness for decision making? Do we measure both effort (e.g. dollars or hours spent) and effectiveness (e.g. energy usage or phosphorus concentrations in water)? Do our metrics consider key aspects of sustainability: people, planet, and prosperity?
- ? Is our public reporting on metrics easy to understand and accessible for the community? Do we report metrics (and context) in ways that are engaging and useful? Do we use language and units of measurement that speak to our community? Is our internal reporting - for staff and electeds - accessible and useful?

## Star-Level Examples



Produce a city environmental/sustainability report/summary with metric indicators; update your city council periodically at public meetings or during an annual work session; involve an existing city council committee or community task force.



Adopt (ideally after a public process and city council review) & commit to measure and annually report on sustainability indicators, generally related to or directly tied to the city's work on GreenStep best practices; may include community-wide energy & water use, vehicle miles traveled, & waste generated ([Regional Indicators Initiative](#) or [Metropolitan Greenhouse Gas Assessment](#)).



Use a public process (or public commission with broad representational diversity) to identify, adopt, & commit to measure and annually report on broad sustainability (environmental, social, & economic) indicators, such as those covered by [GreenStep Step 4/5 metrics](#); compare measurements & outcomes with city goals & performance benchmarks.

# Resources for Measuring Outcomes

The [Step 4/5 Metrics Dashboard](#) provides data visualization for Step 4 & 5 reporting communities that can easily be shared with community leaders and residents.

The [Center for Small Towns](#) at the University of Minnesota - Morris has faculty and students who partner with small cities on data collection and other forms of support on specific issues identified by the city.

Heather Krause. Webinar recording of [“How Not to Use Data Like a Racist.”](#) This webinar (complete with provocative title), has useful insights into unintentional biases that may occur with data collection and evaluation.

Alexis Goggans of Be-Bold Services prepared a set of possible equity-related indicators as part of her [Equity in Action Toolkit](#).

Public Management Review compares sustainability reporting frameworks used by European cities and countries in [“Sustainability Reporting by Local Governments: A Magic Tool? Lessons on Use and Usefulness from European Pioneers.”](#)

The American Planning Association provides a guide for local government that defines sustainability, as well as how to implement, measure, and report it called [“Assessing Sustainability: A Guide for Local Governments.”](#)

The Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE) is a national network of governments working to achieve racial equity and advance opportunities for all. GARE provides a [“Racial Equity Toolkit, An Opportunity to Operationalize Equity”](#) with guidance to set equity goals and measure outcomes.

Use of online maps that incorporate and visualize metrics can be a more engaging reporting mechanism. This student used Geographic Information System (GIS) maps to visualize [environmental justice in the Twin Cities](#).

Review good practices for incorporating equity in a city sustainability plan including metrics on progress in reduction of disparities in [“Equity in Sustainability, An Equity Scan of Local Government Sustainability Programs.”](#) Practices are provided by the Urban Sustainability Directors Network, a peer-to-peer organization of local government professionals.

Additional resources are available on the [Minnesota GreenStep website](#).



**Action 4:**  
*public education  
for action*

***BP 24.4: Conduct or support a broad sustainability education and action campaign, building on existing city & community relationships, networks & events involving:***

- the entire community - community leaders - homeowners - manufactured home communities - landlords and tenants -
- community-based organizations - block clubs - neighborhood associations - front yards/sidewalks -
- congregations - schools - colleges -

## 24.4 in Action: The Morris Model

The University of Minnesota, Morris (UMM) earned a 2017 [Minnesota Climate Adaptation Award](#) by the Minnesota Climate Adaptation Partnership (MCAP). The awards are presented to individuals, organizations, institutions, and businesses in recognition of their exceptional achievements in leadership, education, research, policies, and practices that have resulted in development or implementation of climate change adaptation strategies.

"UMM is to be commended in successfully promoting the 'Morris Model' for public engagement and leading widespread planning for climate adaptation throughout the infrastructure of the greater community that surrounds the campus. In promoting climate resilience UMM has successfully partnered with many different units of government and nonprofit organizations to address areas of concern where climate change is already having impacts. They serve as a terrific role model for other institutions to engage their surrounding community in meeting the challenges of climate change."—Mark Seeley, professor and MCAP Awards Committee co-chair

Want to learn more? There's a website! Check out [The Morris Model](#).

## Why Public Education for Action?

- Engaging community members early and often makes it more likely that solutions will be innovative, appropriate, and accepted.
- Participating community members increase knowledge and problem solving skills.
- Empowers people with different backgrounds to create positive change in their lives and community. It can also build up a network of local community members, strengthening capacity to address challenges successfully.
- Increase trust between community organizations and local government.

## Guiding Questions for Public Education for Action

- ❓ Is the process transparent and participatory? Are we engaging community members in identifying solutions that work for them? Have we created an opportunity for learning through group discussion? Is the process legitimate, with input from all participants incorporated into the project design and implementation?
- ❓ Have we created an environment that will allow long-term and consistent participation from community members? Is a broad cross-section of the community involved? Have we considered potential barriers to participation such as need for child care, transportation, accessibility in location, need for interpreters?
- ❓ Have we provided guidelines for communicating that can help develop trust between community leaders and members? Is objective information provided?
- ❓ Have we considered ways to make participation fun and engaging, like “gamification”?

## Star-Level Examples



At least 2 informational/educational activities or creation of a group to work on such; promotion of/assistance with Friendly Front Yards, block clubs, neighborhood associations. Report marketing & outreach programs that are limited to promoting/achieving residential energy/water use reduction under BPA [2.1](#); report business outreach campaigns under BP [25](#); report youth/student engagement in city government under BPA [24.6](#); report other targeted campaigns under topic-specific actions, e.g. BPA [23.3](#).



Sustained activities covering a range of topics (active living, food, water, energy, electric vehicles, etc.) that have some challenge, assistance &/or measurement elements; documented accomplishments such as Green Ribbon School recognition, GreenStep Schools participation, Friendly Fronts apartment building certification; city work that supports schools/youth (through an ecology club, school green team, Parks & Rec programming, etc.).



Recurring activities & multiple reported outcomes involving diverse audiences within the community with: increased multimodal commuting, increased electric vehicle adoption, equitable access to local and healthy foods, reduced water and energy use, improved water & air quality, etc.

## Resources for Public Education for Action

The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) used a “Citizen Jury” process in 5 counties to discuss climate and generate a place-based response. The philosophy, structure, and outcomes of the [Rural Climate Dialogues](#) are available on their website.

The National League of Cities' [ecoAmerica guides](#) provide research-proven practices for successful climate communication and discussion with community members.

The [Psychology of Sustainable Behavior](#), by Christie Manning, introduces research-based tips from psychology to help in efforts to empower sustainability in residents and the workplace.

Learn more about how Lake Crystal gamified energy efficiency with their [Beat the Peak Challenge](#) (it's BP 2.1, but still relevant to this conversation). Want to really nerd out on gamification? Check out Sarah-Kristin Thiel's article, [“Let's Play Urban Planner: The Use of Game Elements in Public Participation Platforms.”](#)

The University of Minnesota Morris and the surrounding community created the [MN Morris Model](#) to work on sustainability, resilience, and climate change.

The University of Pennsylvania, College of Agricultural Sciences shares a guide as part of their toolbox on [rural community engagement](#).

The UK Based [CommunityPlanningToolkit.org](#) provides a toolkit on community planning.

[Everyday Democracy](#), a project of the Paul J Aicher Foundation, has a mission to advance community dialogue. They provide a series of guides, toolkits, worksheets, and handouts as resources for changemaking through community engagement.

[RacialEquityTools.org](#) provides a page of resources for public engagement with an equity lens.

Additional resources are available on the [Minnesota GreenStep website](#).



**Action 5:**  
*planning with a purpose*

**BP 24.5:** *Conduct a community visioning and planning initiative that engages a diverse set of community members & stakeholders and uses a sustainability, resilience, or environmental justice framework: Strong Towns, Resiliency, Transition, Appreciative Inquiry, Eco-municipalities, Smart Cities, Healthy Communities.*

24.5 in Action:

Warren Designs for Community Regeneration (D4CR)

[D4CR](#) is a MN Design Center initiative that seeks "to imagine and plan a thriving and equitable future for the city of Warren."

*D4CR will partner with communities in a process of imagining and planning their resilient future, addressing food, water, and energy security while increasing economic opportunities, social cohesion, and finding affordable housing options. Communities participate in a ground-up "Geodesign" process assisted by geographic data, and a dashboard for community goals.*

Given the pandemic, meetings have been virtual. These include meetings of four "Point of View" teams, which represent existing residents and businesses, newcomers and cultural organizations, government representatives and organizations, and investors. The teams make use of several key techniques: asset mapping (existing community assets), backcasting (working backward from desired futures), geodesign (using GIS), and a regenerative scorecard (including Place, Water, Energy, Health & Happiness, Materials, Equity, Beauty, and Economic Development).



## Why Plan with a Purpose?

- Building communities that are resilient and livable requires planning with intention.
- Increasing meaningful community engagement leads to better addressing the needs of community members.
- Creating a shared meaning about sustainability increases the community's ability to make progress toward a healthy and sustainable future for all community members.
- A clean and safe environment is essential for a community to thrive and prosper.
- Shared prosperity benefits everyone!

## Guiding Questions for Planning with a Purpose

- ? Who's at the table? Who's missing? Who are our community stakeholders? How are we making sure that stakeholders are represented and do not face barriers to participation? What sources of diversity exist in our community? How are we ensuring that our planning process, participants, and outcomes reflect that diversity?
- ? Do participants have the opportunity to shape programs and policies from the beginning, or is the engagement seen as an opportunity to sell a decision to the community?
- ? What are our guiding principles and mission? What areas do we want to focus on and incorporate into our planning efforts (energy, buildings, transportation, procurement, investments, people, equity, health, air, water, climate, local foods, waste)?
- ? What local data are available about our community assets and needs? How can we use our planning process to build on existing community assets to address community needs?
- ? Is there an existing planning framework that fits our community goals? Do we need to adapt it to fit our local context?
- ? See also the guiding questions for BP 24.1.

## Star-Level Examples



Host a community meeting/event that explicitly uses a sustainability framework. Report staff training and GARE participation under BPA [24.7](#) (previously here). Report specific examples of expanding community engagement to diverse audiences under BPA [24.7](#).



Conduct a health impact assessment of city plans/policies/development; conduct a comprehensive health/housing/ food access study or environmental justice assessment across demographics.



Achieve 2-star rating and adopt a sustainability plan or other implementation plan &/or goals & document concrete actions taken toward achieving them. Report adopted energy or climate plans under BPA [6.5](#). Report adopted equity plans under BPA [24.7](#). Report adopted resiliency plans under BPA [29.2](#).

# Resources for Planning with a Purpose

Review good practices for incorporating equity in a city sustainability plan, including metrics on progress in reduction of disparities, in [“Equity in Sustainability, An Equity Scan of Local Government Sustainability Programs.”](#) Provided by the Urban Sustainability Directors Network a peer-to-peer organization of local government professionals.

Learn about the [Strong Towns](#) approach to making communities stronger and more resilient.

The [Statewide Health Improvement Partnership \(SHIP\)](#) at the Minnesota Department of Health assists with community-driven solutions for healthier living.

University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point, Center for Land Use Education provides a free toolkit on [Eco-Municipalities and Sustainable Communities](#) with a step-by-step approach. You can also learn about the [basics of land use planning](#).

Learn about the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s [Culture of Health Framework](#) focused on achieving health equity by connecting health with social, economic, physical and environmental factors.

From the EPA’s Environmental Justice Workgroup, the report [“EPA Local Government Advisory Committee’s EJ Best Practices for Local Government”](#) identifies current challenges and case studies from across the country of innovative problem solving strategies communities have used to improve environmental and public health outcomes.

Learn about Portland, Oregon's use of a [Framework for Equity](#). Rather than a complaint based system they use a budget-equity assessment process that includes tracking and sharing of data on disparities.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development provides an entry level guide [“Sustainability Planning Toolkit: A Comprehensive Guide to Help Cities and Counties Develop a Sustainability Plan.”](#)

Additional resources are available on the [Minnesota GreenStep website](#).



## 24.6 in Action:

### La Crescent's GreenStep Committee

The City of La Crescent achieved Best Practice Action 24.6 at the 3-star level when they added two high school students to their GreenStep Committee.

Students were chosen by the High School science faculty, approved by the City Council, and hold regular positions on the team. Jason Ludwigson, City Sustainability Coordinator says that the students “provided valuable feedback, particularly to formulate outreach for the Partners in Energy (PiE) program.” PiE is an Xcel Energy grant program that uses local and utility resources to set and meet clean energy goals. Ludwigson continued, “Students’ life experiences and views are different from adults, especially when it comes to sustainability. They will experience more of the climate impacts and challenges in the future, so it is important to have their perspectives on the team.”

La Crescent entered the GreenStep Cities program in 2015 and employed college interns from neighboring cities to great success for the first few years. These part-time student interns helped them organize their GreenStep Committee and set up B3 building benchmarking. Ludwigson said, “depending on the scope of your program and your budget, college interns can be really helpful. They can be most effective if they are enrolled in a degree program specific to sustainability, if they are knowledgeable and passionate, and if they have a mentor.” The city has transitioned in recent years to a part-time paid staff person to advance additional objectives.

## Why Engage the Next Generation?

- It gives young people an additional opportunity to become connected to their community--both natural and human.
- It helps youth develop personal skills and leadership qualities, and prepares youth to be active citizens in democracy.
- Young people have a right to represent their values and priorities! They understand their reality in a way that is different from that of people even just a little older.
- Engaging youth in environmental protection can change not only the youths' behaviors and attitudes, but possibly also those of their families and other adults.
- Youth are valued stakeholders in creating effective and inclusive policies.

## Guiding Questions for Engaging the Next Generation

- ? How are youth and young adults involved in local government and sustainability planning? How can we make youth engagement meaningful and sustained? Do youth and young adults have real opportunities to provide input and affect decision making?
- ? Is the role of the youth representatives clear to adult committee members?
- ? What are the youth groups in our community? Are there ways to involve them in governance? Are there segments of the youth population who are not represented or involved? Have we found ways to involve youth that represent the racial, cultural, economic, and other forms of diversity in our community?
- ? Are there particular barriers that youth face, such as transportation or school schedules? Can we provide training to youth so that they feel comfortable participating?

## Star-Level Examples



Student involvement in Youth in City Government Day; student group engaged with city on a project; student/intern help with GreenStep action entry. Report under action [24.4](#) city staff efforts to support schools/youth to improve their own schools.



Student involvement in a city green committee/commission; separate youth/student committee or commission (note to what extent it focuses on sustainability issues); high school student internships offered in city government; formal city volunteer program focused on youth; create a professional development &/or mentorship program.



3 or more youth/students of varying backgrounds involved in a campaign working directly with your city council; 2 or more dedicated youth positions on a city environmental commission; ongoing connection between a high school environmental club & city commission that has youth positions; regular student interns to work on sustainability issues.

# Resources for Engaging the Next Generation

Minnesota GreenStep has a [GreenStep Schools program](#)!

California's Institute for Local Government provides tips for ["Engaging Youth in Your Agency's Sustainability Activities."](#)

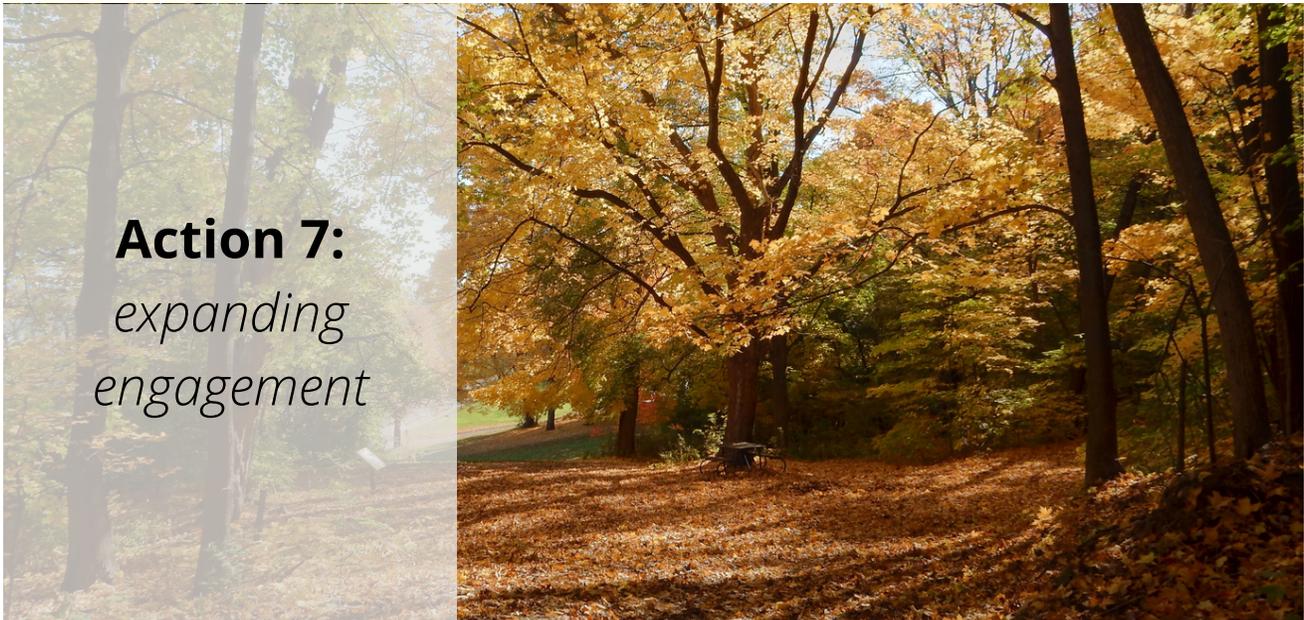
USAID provides ["Youth Engagement in Development: Effective Approaches and Action-Oriented Recommendations for the Field,"](#) which explores the ladder of young people's participation.

The National Civics League reviews seven best practices in ["Best Practices for Youth Engagement in Municipal Government."](#)

From Washington State read dozens of [youth participation examples](#) and sample documents of youth commissions, councils, advisory boards, and student internship programs.

Two MN organizations help students engage with city government: [Youth Environmental Activists Minnesota \(YEA! MN\)](#) and [Youth Eco Solutions \(YES!\)](#).

Additional resources are available on the [Minnesota GreenStep website](#).



## **Action 7:** *expanding engagement*

***BP 24.7: Engage Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), renters, low-income, new Americans, differently abled and other traditionally under-represented community members by encouragement, and support to participate in current and new opportunities to participate in city government.***

### 24.7 in Action:

## Engage Winona Seeks to...Engage Winona!

Engage Winona is a local non-profit organization that works with the City of Winona (as well as other entities) to drive "equitable civic action and social change by working to ensure everyone has access, voice and power in community planning, decision-making and changemaking." Over the past few years, Engage Winona has led and collaborated on numerous projects. One of the most interesting is an effort called the [Lived Experience Leader Cohort](#), which works over the course of several months to develop community members' civic muscles: the skills and confidence to overcome systemic and trust barriers to pursue projects rooted in their lived experiences.

Brian Voerding, founder and director of Engage Winona, offers these suggestions for local governments looking to build trust and expand meaningful engagement:

- Meet people where they're at. Build networks throughout the community.
- Listen hard. Ask questions. You don't have to do it all or know it all.
- Follow their process, not yours.
- Do engagement a little at a time.
- Don't take sides. (If you have to take sides, get a neutral facilitator, and meet in a neutral space.)
- Avoid binary issue framing. Frame in a future-oriented way, with concrete outcomes.

*-Thanks to Brian Voerding for sharing information on Engage Winona.*

## Why Expand Engagement?

- Identifying and addressing community priorities requires that community members have access to the processes where the local government's priorities are set.
- Building on community assets requires a strong understanding what those community assets are and how to build on them.
- Innovation expands where diverse perspectives come together!
- Integrating new community members is essential for economic prosperity. That means making sure *all* community members are able to engage in local government.

## Guiding Questions for Expanding Engagement

- ? Who's in the room? Who's not in the room? Who's speaking? Who's not speaking? Who's being heard? Who's not being heard?
- ? What are the barriers to effective participation? If we don't know what the barriers are, do we ask? Are our public spaces accessible and welcoming? Do we go to where people already or do we expect them to come to us?
- ? Do we provide diverse engagement opportunities, in diverse formats, in diverse spaces, and, when necessary, in diverse languages? Do we provide leadership training opportunities for community members?
- ? Do we communicate in multiple formats, spaces, and languages? If we don't know the best ways to communicate and engage with a given segment of the community, do we go to them and ask what the best ways are?

## Star-Level Examples



Provide diversity, equity, inclusion, & bias training for city staff, electeds, and volunteers; provide ADA and reasonable accommodation training for department heads & managers; develop an equity statement that addresses the city's overarching goals; include an equity chapter in the Comprehensive Plan.



Participate in a process that promotes equity in local government, such as becoming a member of [GARE](#); take multiple concrete steps to increase accessibility of local government operations & decision making, such as by providing childcare for public meetings; hosting participation opportunities in multiple & accessible locations, formats, &/or languages; ensuring that city communications are available in languages spoken by community members; review & assess city regulations for their impacts on underrepresented populations; address equity throughout the Comprehensive Plan.



A committee/commission with wide community representation exists & meets regularly to provide ongoing guidance to city government on expanding & improving the quality of community engagement, particularly among historically marginalized community members; regular reporting on progress made in ensuring equitable access to city government programs, planning, budgeting & decision-making; develop & adopt a community equity plan with ample opportunity for public engagement & participation; use [Equitable Development Scorecard](#) or an equivalent tool to assess development or redevelopment proposals.

# Resources for Expanding Engagement

The [Blandin Community Leadership Program](#) trains leaders from rural Minnesota communities.

For more details on Minnesota's demographics and economic prosperity, see the [Immigrants and Minnesota's Workforce Report](#) from the Committee on Minnesota Workforce and Immigrants.

The Region 5 Development Commission has developed resources around creating [Welcoming Communities](#).

Looking to up your facilitation skills? Check out the [Convergent Facilitation](#) book and trainings.

The [Red Boot Way](#) is a method of intentional listening used by Engage Winona (and many others).

The [Aspen Institute's Better Arguments Project](#) is a national effort to bridge civic divides.

The [League of Minnesota Cities](#) has a useful resource page on race equity.

Additional resources are available on the [Minnesota GreenStep website](#).

**Benchmarks and  
Community Engagement:**  
*some additional useful approaches*



**Beltrami Area  
Resiliency Team:**  
*100 cups of coffee*

100 Cups is an engagement process in Beltrami County, Minnesota, taking place from March-December 2020, led by a group of community members called the Beltrami Area Resiliency Team, and coordinated by the Beltrami Area Service Collaborative.

The process is described as follows:

“100 Cups is a community-driven framework that listens to the voices of those who are not typically at the decision-making table. The format of 100 Cups is simple—volunteer interviewers have cups of coffee one-on-one with 100 community members. Questions center around community values, priorities, strengths, challenges, and hopes for the future.”

Some of the questions included:

- What values do you think are most important to your community?
- What’s something you know that you wish other people in your community knew and paid attention to?
- What are the most significant challenges that your community faces?
- What’s one thing that could be done right now that would make a difference for your community?
- “I wish there was a place in our community where...”
- Do you feel like you have a voice when decisions are made in the community?

The results have been shared on the resiliency team’s website and through events. As of June 2021, this process is focused on community conversations to identify next steps: working toward “self-healing communities, building more empathy within our community, and creating more spaces where all voices are heard.”

Learn more on the [Beltrami Area Resiliency Team website](#).



*The Circle of Healing is a group of Native and non-native people in the Itasca area whose purpose is to take the courageous actions needed to create communities that are culturally aware and considerate of all its residents and visitors.*

The Circle of Healing was formed after nine people from the Itasca area attended a 2011 White Earth Tribal College workshop on Native American historical trauma. The Circle, which continued for a decade, included dozens of community members - both Native and non-native - and was coordinated by Becky LaPlant of the Blandin Foundation. The project summary describes its central approach:

*From that first meeting to the group's conclusion, a Talking Circle was used to convene the group. This way of bringing people together asks that they speak honestly and truthfully from the heart and listen attentively to others, without cross talk or interference when someone else is speaking. This format was invaluable to the group - strong enough to support them through deeply personal conversations, cultural learning, tears, laughter and anger - while flexible enough to allow the group's membership to expand as their work evolved.*

As LaPlant put it, "Talking is action."

Early on, the Circle adopted as its core principles the [Seven Grandfather Teachings](#): Gwayakwaadiziwin (Honesty), Debwewin (Truth), Inendizowin (Humility), Zaagi'idiwin (Love), Nibwaakaawin (Wisdom), Zoongide'iwin (Courage), and Manaaji'idiwin (Respect). Over the next decade, Circle of Healing members retained their commitment to these principles. Working from a place of humility and love often meant learning to suspend judgment and arbitrary timeframes. From historical trauma to present life challenges, "people have so much going on," said LaPlant. "And my timeline doesn't dictate what happens in someone else's community."

It is not possible to list in this space all of the Circle of Healing's many accomplishments,

but here are some of the highlights:

- The establishment and celebration of Indigenous Peoples Day in the City of Grand Rapids, the [Resolution](#) for which was passed unanimously by City Council in 2014.
- The [ceremonial raising of the Leech Lake Tribal Flag](#) at the County Courthouse and Chamber of Commerce buildings.
- Collaboration to reduce barriers for Native American teachers and to ensure the accurate and respectful inclusion of Native American history in school curriculum.
- Hosting of community film screenings and discussions, including the films [Dawnland](#), [Dodging Bullets: Stories from Survivors of Historical Trauma](#), *The Doctrine of Discovery: Unmasking the Domination Code*, *Reel Injun*, *Indian Horse*, and *Neither Wolf Nor Dog*.
- Participation of over 100 people from 12 different organizations (including all of the Grand Rapids Police Department), in Anishinaabe Worldview Training cohorts: 3½ days of immersive training taught by Red Lake Nation Elder Renee Gurneau.
- Establishment of [Biidaajimotaage - S/he Brings the News](#), an active Facebook group with current, local news from Indian Country, as well as information on cultural events, training and volunteer opportunities and resources.
- Bringing the [Why Treaties Matter](#) exhibit to 22 sites across the region.
- Support for the youth-led development and construction of [Mikinaak Park](#), an accessible and culturally significant playground in the community of Ball Club.

The Circle of Healing's accomplishments are impressive, and they did not come easily. The work was built on the foundation of trust, and that trust was built by ongoing, honest dialogue, by humility and a willingness to learn, and by people showing up in ways that valued and supported community members and their goals. Not once, not twice, but over and over again.

*- Thank you to Noreen Hautala and Becky LaPlant for sharing about the Circle of Healing.*



Artist Wesley May, with youth members Arionna and Teona, creating a Seven Teachings mural during a pre-Covid summer gathering.



## Rural Climate Dialogues: *citizens juries*

*For climate solutions to work, they must be connected to community solutions.... Listening to communities about what they need is the only way to create policies that work on the ground and bring people together. -Tara Ritter, IATP*

From 2014 - 2020, the [Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy](#) partnered with the [Center for New Democratic Processes](#) (formerly Jefferson Center) to host [Rural Climate Dialogues](#) in five Minnesota counties: Stevens, Itasca, Winona, Redwood, and Murray. Conversations focused on community resilience and local energy systems, and brought together 15-21 randomly selected participants representative of the community, a form of engagement called the "[Citizens Jury](#)."

Over the course of a session lasting 2-3 days, participants (who were compensated for their time) got to know each other, established ground rules for discussion, heard presentations from local subject matter experts, debriefed and deliberated after each presentation, collectively drafted a statement for their neighbors, and voted to identify key community challenges.



Each RCD's recommendations have been shared widely:

*The most effective messengers of this information are participants themselves. Participants have presented their recommendations to their county commissions and city councils, state agency staff, the Rural Minnesota Energy Board and other local collaboratives. In every community, we have also worked with the news media to write and broadcast follow-up articles and interviews about the event, and in some cases, to place opinion editorials from event participants and organizers. This ensures that RCD results are transparent and fully available to the public.*



Creating jobs was once the focus of economic development, but in recent years, this has shifted to the need for workers, especially in rural parts of MN that are seeing aging residents and slower population growth. A recent [University of Minnesota \(UMN\) study](#) found that a quarter of economic growth over the last 45 years was due to a growing labor force. They estimate that Minnesota will need to increase migration to our state by four and a half times to meet labor force needs, and that much of that will likely need to be met by international migration. As a result, a number of communities have joined the "welcoming movement." [Welcoming America](#) defines this as communities that promote "intentional, inclusive policies, practices and norms that enable all residents to live, thrive, and contribute fully – including immigrants."

Fatima Said is the Executive Director of Winona County's [Project FINE \(Focus on Integrating Newcomers through Education\)](#). She, herself, was a Bosnian refugee. For over 30 years Project FINE has been helping refugees and immigrants in the region. Along with advocacy, information referrals, translation, and legal assistance, Project FINE offers employment services. Regional employers frequently reach out to Project FINE for help finding workers. Project FINE in turn reaches out to immigrant populations. According to Said, "with refugee and immigrant populations, everything starts with a job. All of them want to work and make a living."

UMN Extension is also helping communities, through the ["Making it Home" program](#), which helps participants create a community-wide vision for attracting new residents. Jennifer Hawkins, UMN Extension Educator, worked with [Spring Valley](#), a small community in Southeastern MN. "We trained six terrific facilitators for local study circles," says Hawkins. "Those facilitators brought together school children, retirees, teachers, newcomers and others to talk about what's great about Spring Valley, and how those assets can be leveraged to attract more residents."



## **Destination Medical Center:** *Discovery Walk*

In Rochester, a pilot project is employing “Community Co-Designers” to help plan [Discovery Walk](#) design concepts. Destination Medical Center and several community partners are working together to ensure that more diverse voices are included in the design of public spaces, policies and programs.

Kevin Bright, director of energy and sustainability for Destination Medical Center Economic Development Agency and the City of Rochester, is leading the effort in partnership with Jess Roberts, Affiliate Researcher at the Minnesota Design Center at the University of Minnesota. A steering committee comprised of several community organizations helped to develop the initiative.

The steering committee chose to pilot this new approach on the design of Discovery Walk, a planned linear parkway along 2nd Ave SW from Annenberg Plaza to Soldiers Field Park.

“We found that sometimes the people that are most impacted by projects, programs and policies are not part of the design process,” said Kevin Bright, director of energy and sustainability for Destination Medical Center and the City of Rochester. “The framework we developed creates formalized opportunities for power-sharing and shared decision making. This, in turn, leads to healthier and more equitable public spaces.”



**St. Paul Climate  
Justice Advisory  
Board:**  
*at the intersection  
of the 3 Ps*

The City of St. Paul's Climate Justice Advisory Board (CJAB) was formed in August 2020 to support the implementation of the city's Climate Action and Resilience Plan. According to the [City of St. Paul](#), the Board's "work will focus on ensuring that the costs and benefits of new programs in clean energy, energy efficiency, the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, and climate resilience and adaptation are equitably distributed to ensure Saint Paul's most vulnerable residents benefit as much or more from these changes as the City's less vulnerable populations."

[According to Mayor Melvin Carter](#), "Ensuring the many voices of our community are heard in shaping our climate action and resilience work is vital." The CJAB is composed of 13-17 community representatives, taking into account geographic distribution, as well as designating one seat each for the business community, the building/construction trades, and academia. The Climate Justice Advisory Board is also a great example of inviting youth onto your government boards and commissions: the CJAB has two youth members.

One of those youth members—Adri Arquin—was featured, along with Russ Stark (St. Paul's Chief Resilience Officer), in a July 2021 conversation about the CJAB, hosted by Janiece Watts of Fresh Energy. That webinar can be found on the [Fresh Energy website](#).

## **The Value of a Photo:**

*using pictures in community engagement*



Sometimes, the most effective way for community members to express their values, priorities, and aspirations for their families and their communities is through pictures. There are various ways to incorporate photos into community engagement. One of the simplest is to provide a way for community members to submit photos on a particular topic. For instance, if your city is doing a comprehensive plan, you might ask community members to send in pictures of things that they like about their community and would like to see more of.

A more intensive approach, photovoice, is a visual research methodology that is particularly well suited to stimulating useful conversations around social concerns. Alyssa Scott, who led a photovoice process in Long Prairie, Minnesota, shared fundamentals of the approach: “There are three main goals...First, to enable people to capture and share their perspectives on their community. Second, to promote dialogue in small groups about community issues. Third, to take action on what is learned in a way that is meaningful to the group.” Some important things to keep in mind:

- Conversations about social issues can be tricky. Use a trained facilitator for conversations.
- Trust is critical. Establish mutually acceptable ground rules for photographs and conversations. In some projects, for instance, photographs may not include recognizable people.
- People’s time and perspectives have value. Consider providing stipends and/or meals for participants.
- Follow-up matters. How would participants like you to use the information they have provided?

For more information on Photovoice, see [\*Creating a Welcoming Community: A Toolkit to Support Immigrants, Refugees, and BIPOC.\*](#)



# How Not to Use Data Like a Racist:

*process and perspectives*

So you're thinking to yourself, the data never lies. Well, maybe it does, and maybe it doesn't. However, it definitely tells a story, and every story is told from a perspective. And if you care about equity, it's essential to look at your data with that in mind.

As Heather Krause puts it in the webinar, *How Not to Use Data Like a Racist*, "Quantitative data has a perspective, lived experiences, built into it at all times. There's no such thing as quantitative data that is objective, when 'objective' means 'has no worldview, values, or lived experience baked into it.'"

She suggests that there is a lifecycle of data--



--and suggests that we ask what perspectives, values, and worldviews are embedded at each stage of the process. The rest of the webinar gives concrete suggestions on how to do that.

[Check it out on youtube!](#)

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