

Summary of “Addressing the Sustainability Gap in the Development Review Process: A Guide for Empowering Environmental Committees”

Summary 6/18/21 MPCA [MN RETAP](#) Project - Michael Orange, 952-905-1448 orange_michael@msn.com

We’re Seeking Reviewers! Please send a note to Kristin Mroz MN GreenStep Cities Coordinator 651-757-2793 kristin.mroz-risse@state.mn.us to sign up to receive the draft guide once it is available. We invite you to review the draft guide and send in edits, comments & suggestions.

Introduction and purpose: The following summarizes a report currently being finalized by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, “Addressing the Sustainability Gap in the Development Review Process: A Guide for Empowering Environmental Committees” (Guide). The purpose of the Guide is to help empower environmental committee members to be more effective at making their city more sustainable, resilient, and equitable by advocating for an environmental focus throughout the city’s development review process. (Several terms are in general usage for citizen groups that advise local governments on environmental matters, e.g., committee, commission, and green team. For simplicity, this report will use *environmental committee* as a generic term for all such groups.)

Environmental committee members are not expected to become experts in every field that affects a larger project under permit review, nor is the Guide an encyclopedia for sustainability (the Minnesota [GreenStep Cities program](#) already does that). The Guide has 40 pages not 400. The goal is to provide an overview and the resource links to enable a committee to go as deep as needed to evaluate a proposed project so members can ask the right questions, demand answers, and advocate for dramatic change.

We know what needs to be done and that it needs to be done yesterday; we know how to do it and how to pay for it; and we know that doing it will save money over the longer run. The only real barrier is commitment.

“This is all wrong. I shouldn’t be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you! You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I’m one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!”

—[Statement](#) by climate activist, Greta Thunberg, 16,
at the United Nations Climate Action Summit in New York City, 9/23/19

The development review process is where the proverbial “rubber meets the road;” where a city’s zoning code and other ordinances translate the city’s longer-range, more general and aspirational policies and plans into concrete, steel, and—hopefully—sustainable design.

The Guide has 8 main sections:

- 1. The climate change future—a call to action:** This first section makes the case that swift and effective action is needed. Committee members can use the information about climate change effects in Minnesota to advocate for urgent change.

Minnesota’s Next Generation Energy Act of 2007 aims for an 80% reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by the year 2050. We not on track to meet the goals. However, there’s a lot going on, especially in cities. More than 92% of Minnesotans live in cities and towns, and cities are the source for nearly ¾ of the carbon dioxide generated from fossil fuels. Clearly, action at the local governmental level is the best way to mitigate climate change, enhance sustainability and resiliency, and improve environmental justice. In particular, over 140 city councils in the state have joined the GreenStep Cities program.

- 2. The third “E” in sustainability—equity, and climate refuges:** This section addresses equity and environmental justice issues, and climate refugees.

“By the end of 2020, more than 83 million Americans were having trouble meeting bills or buying food, and by January 2021, 30 to 40 million Americans were at risk of eviction because they could not make their rent payments. This crisis hit women and people of color the hardest because they tend to work in face-to-face jobs, which did not translate to remote work, and because the loss of childcare drove women out of the workforce. 39% of low-income households saw job losses early in the pandemic.”

—Historian, [Heather Cox Richardson](#), 3/6/21

We are facing an environmental and an equity crisis. The Guide also addresses the intersection of environmental degradation, housing segregation via zoning codes, and systemic racism.

- 3. Future changes affecting larger developments—the past does not predict the future:** The following changes affect larger developments: Increased remote shopping and excess retail space, changes in the type of jobs and great increases in remote employment, reduced commuting and parking space demands, accelerating transition to electrified transportation, and increased mixed-use and mixed-income developments.
- 4. Minnesota programs for local governments—what’s going on:** This chapter summarizes 20 state and local programs that can help a city establish and meet its sustainability goals.
- 5. Municipal development tools—the tool box:** This chapter provides a primer on the development tools cities use to ensure developments are consistent with their plans

and codes. Throughout, are scores of hyperlinks to the GreenStep Cities program and other resources on these and other issues:

- Building siting, reuse, adaptation, and deconstruction
- Sustainable design and solar resources
- GHG emission reduction
- Electric vehicles
- Outdoor lighting and crime prevention through environmental design
- Wildlife habitat
- Equitable mobility
- Parking and travel demand management
- Parking lot design, landscape design, tree orientation, shadows, and wind
- Stormwater management
- Economic impact studies
- Emergency management and broadband access

6. & 7. Case studies—two practical examples: The next two sections provide detailed analyses of two actual projects.

8. Resources: The Resources section at the end provides 5 pages of valuable links to a full range of information to help a committee do its job.