

## Practicing Sustainable Community Development

According to Court Gould, Executive Director of Sustainable Pittsburgh, sustainable community development is “the hottest topic in municipal management” today. Western Pennsylvania’s municipal officials seem to agree, for twenty-eight people representing twenty-three municipalities came to the Millvale Community Center on June 3, 2008 to learn more, making this LGA’s most successful one-day program of the year to date.

Gould opened the program by introducing the attendees to sustainable development, defining it as “meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” He emphasized the comprehensive nature of sustainability, that it is “a framework” rather than a “thing you can point to”. High gas prices, global warming and increasing economic disparity are issues currently on everyone’s minds, and sustainability is becoming a ‘hot’ topic because it addresses all three areas – the economy, the environment, and social equity. Gould then addressed the three areas and discussed sustainable and non-sustainable approaches to each, encouraging “foresight” when making municipal decisions – looking at the long term consequences of choices made today. [Click [here](#) for Sustainable Pittsburgh’s Sustainability Assessment Tool for Municipalities]

Matt Mehalik, also of Sustainable Pittsburgh, continued the program, discussing examples of good sustainable practices found in municipalities across the country, from Santa Monica, California to Shaker Heights, Ohio. Mehalik noted the importance of rapid feedback loops in municipal management – the ability of the system to adapt by quickly identifying and solving problems. Mehalik also mentioned the high level of flexibility involved in sustainable development – each community can make use of the sustainable strategies that are right for them. Some new developments he discussed were designed to contain urban sprawl and reduce traffic, while others focused on preserving housing stock and property values. Still others explored bike sharing programs, telecommuting and expanded use of composting. Overall, Mehalik emphasized that a custom approach to sustainability for each community is the way to succeed.

Speaking next was John Trant, the Chief Strategic Planning Officer for Cranberry Township, who demonstrated that sustainable strategies are relevant to all communities. Trant noted that Cranberry exceeds state requirements for recycling and has started using energy-saving LED traffic light bulbs, but the real focus for Cranberry seemed to be on land use. Since Cranberry is a fast-growing community, they are aggressively

updating zoning and planning codes. Their goals include affordable housing, and mixed-use developments to counter economic fluctuations.

Continuing the discussion of zoning and land use was Ray Reaves, the Local Government Academy's Multi-Municipal Planning Grant Manager. He encouraged local officials to take sustainability into their own hands, and he mentioned sources of funding (including LGA's Multi-Municipal Planning Grants) to accomplish this. The role of municipal officials in sustainable development, Reaves said, is much greater than that of the private sector. He then reviewed tools in the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code that make it possible for communities to promote sustainability through their planning and zoning activities.

Anne Swager of the American Institute of Architects – Pittsburgh, brought a designer's perspective to the program. She discussed "good design" vs. "bad design", and how sustainable design can be used to make communities more attractive to residents and businesses alike. Swager stressed that good design improves the experience of people in the community in many ways, from improved lighting that decreases crime to better sidewalks which increase street safety. Catching the attention of the attendees, Swager mentioned that well-planned sustainable living is likely to attract younger residents, something that Western Pennsylvania struggles to do.

The final presenter of the day, Nathan Wildfire of East Liberty Development, Inc., presented on the current revitalization of Pittsburgh's East Liberty neighborhood. He gave a brief history of the neighborhood, which was a major commercial center until a disastrous urban renewal attempt which began in the 1950's. Closing off the community center with a one-way circle and building several poorly-managed high-rise apartment buildings effectively "eviscerated the soul of [the] neighborhood" while eliminating 1 million square feet of usable space. Today, however, East Liberty is a "pilot zone" for sustainable development theories, and new businesses and housing continue to grow. Social equity and economic growth are two main priorities – ELDI has been involved with the building of mixed-income housing and helping business owners to succeed through classes and networking connections. Wildfire promoted the comprehensive nature of ELDI's neighborhood plan, including the environment: East Liberty is the site of the state's first Green Vision plan for an urban distressed area, new businesses are LEED certified, and community gardens are in the works.

Court Gould ended the day by affirming that sustainability “has a foothold” in Western Pennsylvania, and attendees left with the information and resources to put into place sustainable strategies of their own.