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Sustainable Westchester: A Case Study in a Community Collaborative Effort

By Edna Sussman

Responding to communities' need for guidance on how to foster sustainability and tackle global warming, a wealth of websites and manuals have been developed with concrete action step recommendations and real life examples of successful measures. A growing number of individual communities have developed and released instructive climate change/sustainability plans. Less however, has been written about the collaborative process that communities have and must undertake in order to develop a strategy and plan that gains wide acceptance and participation by all segments of the community: government, business, education and the general citizenry. While each community will have to be cognizant of and responsive to its own unique power bases and motivators, it would be instructive to share experiences among communities in approaching collaborative planning for sustainability and global warming. This is the story of one community, Westchester County, New York.

Westchester County was blessed with a county government that was environmentally friendly and had undertaken many measures to improve the environment. Among many measures already adopted, the County had dedicated large sums for open space preservation, did not use pesticides on its beautiful county parks, had worked hard to get the county airport ISO 14001 certified, and lunched a concerted water quality campaign. But the necessary systemic approach to the issues facing the county through broad scale sustainability planning that served to inform county and local governments as well as other segments of the community had not been undertaken.

Action for Tomorrow's Environment, a local not for profit organization, approached the county in 2004 urging the adoption of a sustainability resolution and the commencement of county wide sustainability planning. (The letter is available at http://www.actionfortomorrow.org/west_letter.htm) The County legislature responded by asking that a task force be formed that could provide more details as to what was being proposed. The Sustainable Westchester Task Force ("Sustainability Task Force") was formed and completed its work in early 2006 with the release of a comprehensive planning document outlining why sustainability planning was essential and proposing a structured process for community engagement and for the development of the plan. (The report is available at http://www.actionfortomorrow.org/docs/Sustainability_draft_032206.pdf)

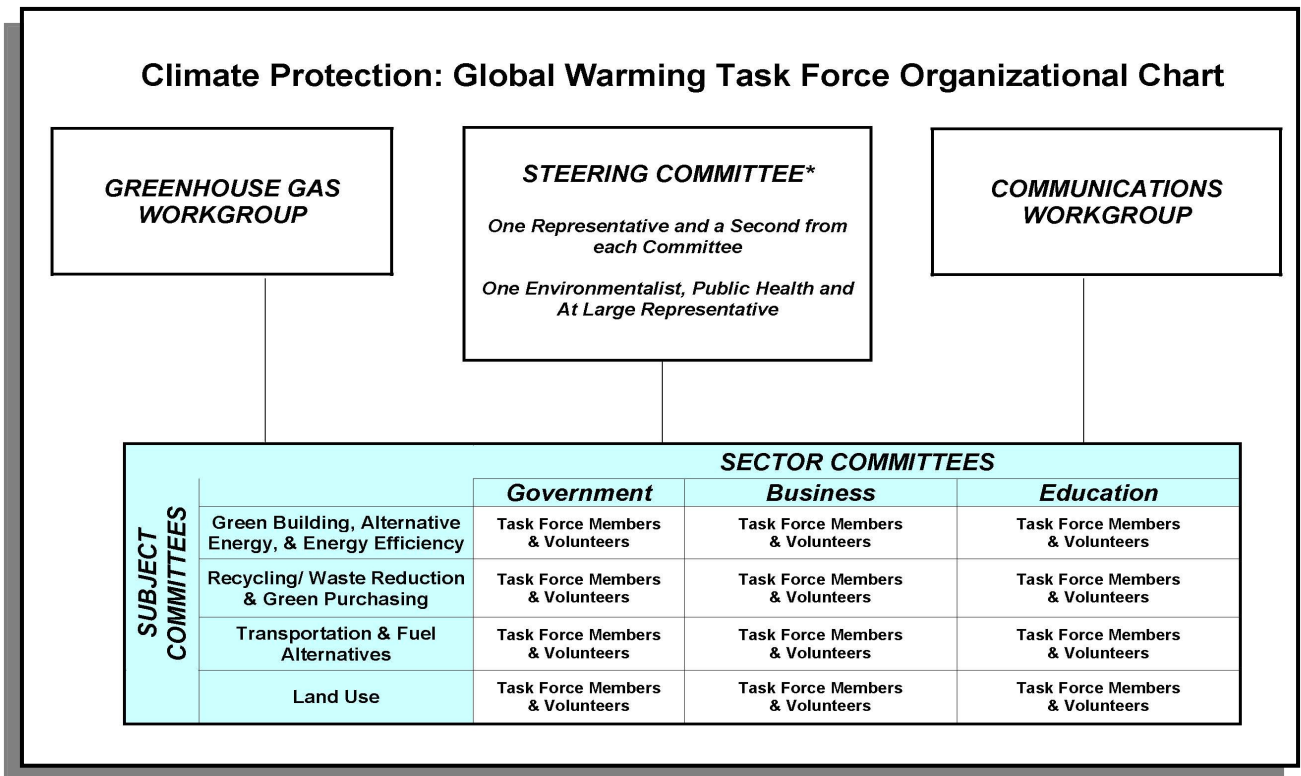
While the report was being prepared the Sustainability Task Force began the process of contacting and recruiting representatives from various segments of the community to elicit their support for and participation in the planning process so that the project launch would be quick and effective once the county was persuaded to start.

As they say, “timing is everything.” Shortly after the completion of the Sustainability Task Force report “An Inconvenient Truth” was released, a movie that had dramatic impact on so many, as was recognized by the Nobel Peace Prize that former vice-president Al Gore received. The Westchester County Executive, Andrew Spano, saw the movie and immediately moved forward with the creation of a county wide Global Warming Task Force (“GW Task Force”). While the main focus was to be on global warming, sustainability was to be part of the mission. Such issues as water quality, so important in Westchester which is part of the New York City watershed, were to be included in the effort. The GW Task Force was launched in January of 2007.

The GW Task Force mission was “to identify practical steps to reduce global warming and foster sustainable development, and to present this information in action plans and implementation strategies appropriate for all sectors of the community.” The Task Force was asked to: 1. Update a six year old GHG inventory; 2. Recommend an emissions reduction goal; 3. Develop action plans to achieve the goal; 4. Recommend a sustainable development program for Westchester; 5. Develop a plan to monitor progress.

With the appointment of 34 members to the Global Warming Task Force the work began. These were not political appointments. Great care was taken to create a solid working group and select representatives to the task force who could provide both subject matter expertise and an ability to engage important constituent groups in the county. Maximizing the utilization of existing resources in the county was a priority. Local not-for profits with relevant expertise, existing umbrella organizations such as the county business groups, the universities consortium, and the municipal officials association and leading community organizations were tapped for the effort. A county employee in charge of environmental matters and the supervisor of one of the municipalities were appointed to co-chair the GW Task Force.

As shown on the chart below, the task force was structured to establish committees both by subject matter and by community sectors.



Three sector committees were created: 1. Government- which included both county employees and representatives from the 43 municipalities in Westchester; 2. Business – with representation from several of the businesses in the county as well as from the two major business organizations in the county; and 3. Education – with representation from the many institutions of higher education and K-12 in the county. The faith based community and the general citizenry were included in this sector.

Four subject committees were formed with at least two representatives from each sector committee: 1. Energy – which included energy efficiency, green building and renewable energy; 2. Transportation and alternative transportation fuels; 3. Waste reduction, recycling and environmentally preferable purchasing; and 4. Land use.

Two overarching committees were formed to work on the preparation of a county greenhouse gas inventory and to work on the press relations and outreach that would be critical to the success of the effort. A steering committee with two representatives from each committee was formed. Following the introductory meeting, the GW Task Force was opened up to community volunteers who could join as GW Task Force associates. Many well informed community members joined in that capacity and provided invaluable input.

The county joined the ICLEI Cities for Climate Protection Campaign program and county employees were assigned the task of working with the task force and

facilitating its progress. The county also employed the services of an outside consultant to assist in streamlining communications and helping to consolidate the work of the committees.

The committees work began with a focus on the subject matter development of action steps to recommend in each area of concern. The recommendations developed by the subject committees were recorded on a common matrix used by all committees so that they could be readily reviewed by the sector committees and consolidated. Once the subject committees had completed their work, the recommendations were turned over to the sector committees to assess which action steps would be most suitable and practically and economically feasible for their constituencies to accomplish. Action steps were ranked by each sector in order of priority and strategies for implementation were developed. The county greenhouse gas inventory which showed that 40 percent of emissions were generated by transportation, 35 per cent by the residential sector and 25 per cent by the industrial sector was considered in developing the final recommendations. Work began on developing resources for implementation for the web site that would accompany the recommendations.

While many solutions related to buildings are common to all, different constituent groups have different characteristics and require the development of individualized action steps. Moreover, some can be expected only to improve their own operations while others have opportunities to influence others as well and should be encouraged to do so. Accordingly, the GW Task Force's goal was to prepare a program for each constituent group in the county, i.e., local government, K-12, universities, the faith based community, citizens, and various types of business such as offices, retail, restaurants, hospitality, health care and multi-nationals corporations.

The work of the GW Task Force launched in January of 2007 culminated in the public release of the action plan in February of 2008. The plan is available at http://www.westchestergov.com/environment_globalwarmingactionplan.htm A full day public event was held with many exhibitors and a series of sessions targeted to each sector so all can learn more about how they can contribute to this critical county initiative. Following the release of the action plan, each sector continued with outreach and implementation measures.

The Westchester effort provides one model of how a sustainability initiative can be realized. We invite you to share with us your experiences and provide other models for consideration by the many communities undertaking this work.

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