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Fairfield first: Town adopts groundbreaking sustainability plan

By Linda Egenes

Imagine a small town where homes are powered by the city's own wind farm and energy consumption citywide has dropped by 60 percent. Accessible pathways lace the town, making it easy for people to bike or walk to work. One-fourth of the produce offered in the supermarkets is locally grown, raised on thriving farms that surround the town. Tourists boost city revenues by flocking to the fully functioning sustainable living center. Needless to say, the economy of this small town is booming, stimulated by tax cuts and energy savings, with ample jobs created from innovative, eco-friendly enterprises.

This is the future that the town of Fairfield, population 9,650, envisions for itself. And to ensure that this happens, town leaders recently ratified the Fairfield Green Strategic Plan — a coordinated effort to create a sustainable, green community within 10 years.

It all started with an idea that mayor Ed Malloy had been turning over in his mind for a couple of years: an idea to develop an integrated plan to move Fairfield toward a green future.

"When the energy crisis hit, it seemed like the right time to float this idea," says the 50-something mayor. "To me, being sustainable means helping the planet, but it also means sustaining our community's economic viability in the face of global climate change, population growth and the current economic crisis."

In February 2008, Mayor Malloy formed a commission to research and write the Fairfield Green Strategic Plan, appointing 20-plus members from all walks of life. "We included small business owners, bankers, manufacturers, educators and experts in waste management and soil and water conservation," says Malloy. "The idea was to involve every sector of the community."

In November 2008, the city council unanimously ratified the 28-page green strategic plan. At the same time, the planners garnered an \$80,000 grant from the Iowa Office of Energy Independence. The Iowa Power Fund grant will allow Fairfield to inventory its greenhouse gases, hire a sustainability coordinator, create a household guide about sustainability and share its research with other Iowa cities.

A community-wide effort

According to Connie Boyer, CFO of Iowa State Financial Services Corporation and the co-chair of Fairfield's green planning commission, the plan has three main parts: 1. creating a culture of sustainability, including education and raising awareness; 2. economic development, which includes opportunities for new businesses and jobs in the area of sustainability as well as ways to adopt green solutions and save money; and 3. sustainable community design and public policy and infrastructure, which is about decisions the city can make to create a green future.

The plan's wide range of objectives include reducing non-renewable energy consumption and increasing energy generation; conserving water, protecting the air and transforming waste into useful resources; designing buildings and landscapes for efficiency and human well-being; and supporting a prosperous and sustainable local farm economy.

"Now that the Fairfield Green Strategic Plan has been approved by the city council, the commission has moved to the next step and is meeting with various community leaders to ask them to take responsibility for different sections of the plan," says Malloy.

For example, one goal is to create an organization to develop local food production and processing. Community organizations being asked to take responsibility for that part of the plan are Hometown Harvest, Pathfinders Resource Conservation and Development, and, as secondary leaders, the Fairfield Entrepreneurs Association and Maharishi University of Management.

"We're saying, 'This is one of the plan's goals, and can you take responsibility for making that happen,'" says Boyer. "As we talk to these various community leaders, it also gives them the chance to give us feedback and help us take a different direction if necessary. Ultimately, that will make the Fairfield Green Strategic Plan even stronger."

The real genius of the plan is the way it involves every member of the community, from school children to housewives to factory workers.

"From the very beginning, the idea was that different people have different ideas of what will happen in the future and what it means to go green," says Boyer. "So this plan is about the things that everyone can agree on — how to save money and make our planet a better place."

One of the first steps is to galvanize the citizens of Fairfield to reduce their own energy usage, whether that means wrapping their hot-water pipes with insulation or installing solar panels or riding bikes to work. This will be done through creating and distributing a household guide



Ann Scholl Rinehart
Fairfield, Iowa, mayor Ed Malloy stands near the retention pond, a part of the Urban Steward Alliance Rain Water Management Project.



Ann Scholl Rinehart
This parking lot at the Urban Steward Alliance Rain Water Management Project site in Fairfield, Iowa, is an example of eco paving.

and through an educational campaign using all available media, says mayor Malloy.

Another important step is to hire a community sustainability coordinator by March 2009, who will coordinate the efforts of various community sectors and keep the plan moving forward.

Helping other towns go green

As possibly the first small community in the nation to adopt a comprehensive green plan, Fairfield is planning to take a leadership role. One of the major objectives of its strategic plan is to help other communities go green.

"We want to create a model community, a virtual template that other small towns can adopt to create the same results," says Malloy.

He points out that Fairfield already has many of the resources to move forward. It is the home of Maharishi University of Management, for instance, which offers the first sustainable living major in the country. The students and faculty there have spearheaded the ongoing construction of a revolutionary 7,000-square-foot Sustainable Living Center and classroom building on campus, using wind and solar power, earth block construction, rainwater catchment systems, and geothermal heating and cooling systems. University farms already grow organic food in gardens and greenhouses, supplying the university cafeteria and nearby grocery stores with local food year-round.

"Many of the sustainable living department's faculty and graduates have donated their consulting services to help the commission create Fairfield's Green Strategic Plan, and we're hoping they will continue to lend their expertise to various projects over the years," says Malloy.

He points to the city's strong entrepreneurial sector, which he predicts will rise to the occasion and provide many of the services that will be needed to turn the town green.

Fairfield also has many existing demonstration projects, which serve as models for sustainable living. Malloy cites Abundance Ecovillage, a Fairfield development with off-the-grid homes powered by wind and solar, rain catchment and retaining ponds, and recycled sewage. Downtown, KRUU 100.1 FM, Fairfield's local radio station, has installed solar panels to run its services completely off the grid.

One of the grander aspects of the plan is to build a sustainability center on the south edge of Abundance Ecovillage. The center will include classrooms, workshop space and dormitory rooms for hosting educational seminars and courses. In this way, the city hopes to become a nationally known center for sustainability.

Already, notes Boyer, the city has been accepted in an incentive program offered by Alliant Energy to switch to LED traffic lights, which are brighter, use less energy, and last years longer than the current incandescent bulbs. The estimated savings in energy usage and personnel: \$18,000 a year.

On a personal note, Boyer and her husband have asked a group of sustainable living students from the university to assess the couple's historic bed-and-breakfast to recommend ways to make it more energy efficient.

It is individual actions like this, multiplied many times, that will make the plan a success.

Mayor Malloy predicts that the plan will pay for itself in energy savings. "The nice thing is that the savings can be rolled into the future budget."

Even with such a daunting task ahead of him, the mayor is relaxed and confident that Fairfield can achieve its far-reaching goals to become one of the first sustainable, green communities in America. "I don't feel any pressure," he says.

"I see it as an opportunity to engage in big thinking, for our community to join together in accomplishing a big task in a way that is fun and light-hearted."

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