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Analysis of Green Practices and Community Gardening in Seattle

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Of the cities leading the way in the "greening" of America, Seattle definitely deserves consideration for the greenest. Seattle has gained the reputation of being one of the most sustainable cities in the United States, boasting various innovative policies and technologies, all of which make Seattle more sustainable. With a metropolitan population of 2.7 million people, Seattle is easily the largest city in the northwest United States. Situated between the Puget Sound and Lake Washington, Seattle is surrounded by forests and mountains, allowing the city to have lots of ties to the nature encompassing it.

Seattle continues to improve its sustainable practices as outlined in the Seattle Comprehensive Plan, *Toward a Sustainable Seattle*. The city already uses over ninety percent alternative energy for electricity, promotes green and human-powered transit, and boasts excellent goals for urban design. In addition, Seattle has a strong sustainable food production method in community gardening. However, the city does have some shortcomings in its green initiatives, such as promoting green businesses and jobs, but these are relatively minor shortcomings in a model city. Of the many strong initiatives, community gardening is arguably the leading example of the city's sustainability efforts.

This paper will provide both an overview and an evaluation of the city's plan, including each of the city's initiatives in major areas where sustainability is a concern will be assessed. Naturally, the plan will have both strengths and weaknesses, and these will be identified. In the second section, Seattle's best green practice will be isolated and analyzed. The final section will include evaluations of the city's plan and other initiatives, outlining specific strengths and weaknesses of Seattle's sustainability initiatives. It will also include an analysis of the portability of Seattle's initiatives and suggestions for future sustainable policies.

Toward a Sustainable Seattle: Overview and Analysis

In 2005, Seattle introduced its sustainability plan, *Toward a Sustainable Seattle*, and put the plan into action. The comprehensive plan, which is very goal oriented, covers a wide range of issues. *Toward a Sustainable Seattle* is guided by four core values: community, environmental stewardship, economic opportunity and security, and social equity. Seattle's success in upholding all four of these values is the city's main determinant of the plan's success or failure (City of Seattle 2005). The plan is divided into eleven main sections, each devoted to a specific aspect of city growth.

Although the plan is titled *Toward a Sustainable Seattle*, the plan is more a set of guidelines for city growth and policy in general, not necessarily for sustainability-related issues. However, the plan is very strong in advocating green practices, even though some of the city's strongest initiatives were omitted almost entirely from the plan. The strengths of Seattle's growth and sustainability plan lie in the urban

design, transit, and energy aspects of the plan, while its weaknesses include green business and jobs. In the following paragraphs, Seattle's sustainability plan will be analyzed. The main focus of this section will be on Seattle's urban design, energy, transit, food production, waste management, and green jobs and business.

Section one of *Toward a Sustainable Seattle* focuses on urban design. Seattle is trying to employ an Urban Village Strategy in its planning and development of building stronger, more sustainable communities. The Urban Village Strategy allows Seattle to create distinct neighborhoods with diverse housing and employment growth and pedestrian oriented transit (City of Seattle 2005). These villages allow the population to grow uniformly throughout the city and decrease the need for cars and other greenhouse gas emitting vehicles. By creating an environment where almost all daily amenities are within walking distance, cars are unnecessary commodities. According to Natalie Singer, the developers of the Snoqualmie Ridge Village believe that the development cuts down on traffic, pollution, and the isolation of suburban sprawl. In addition, the village provides a higher quality of life than in traditional neighborhoods (Singer 2004).

Seattle citizens can rely on public transit to take them from village to village, greatly reducing carbon emissions and even clearing traffic on roadways. In addition, the villages allow Seattle to build on successful aspects of the urban character throughout the city. Seattle has designated four main types of villages throughout the city: urban centers, manufacturing/industrial centers, hub villages, and residential villages (City of Seattle 2005). These four categories of villages vary in density and main purpose, either residential, employment, or both. By clearly

defining the many villages throughout Seattle, the city is able to monitor and shape growth in a way that advocates more sustainable practices.

Seattle addresses the issue of energy in the utilities section of *Toward a Sustainable Seattle*. Seattle is already a national leader in electricity production, with over ninety percent of its electricity produced by alternative energy, allowing Seattle to become the first official carbon-neutral city in America (Datko, Hess 2010). Seattle City Light is the city's publicly owned electric power utility, and this company produces a majority of the city's electricity. Almost all of this energy is produced from hydro plants outside the city (City of Seattle 2011a). Seattle is also interested in wind power, as the state of Washington is beginning to require acquisition of renewable resources such as wind. The city has contracted the Stateline Project in eastern Washington and Oregon to produce wind; this source is capable of producing 175 megawatts of power. Wind power is beginning to make up a larger portion of Seattle's energy production, lowering the city's reliance on hydro power (City of Seattle 2011a). With such innovative electricity production already in use, the utilities section in the sustainability plan is more focused on increasing reliability and providing low-cost energy to all of Seattle's residents. The energy section in Seattle's sustainability plan is one of the more concise elements of the plan, mainly because of Seattle's impressive energy production methods already in place.

A third major area of the city's sustainability efforts is the greening of public transit. Seattle focuses on both public and human-powered transit, both of which are addressed in the transportation element of the sustainability plan. The city

states that its Urban Village Strategy will shape the city's transportation facilities (City of Seattle 2005). In addition, Seattle wants to implement street classifications by use in order to better control traffic. By identifying the primary function of roadways, the city can enhance the roadways to more efficiently serve its purpose (City of Seattle 2005). The city wants to increase transportation choices and reduce car use by making public and human-powered transit more appealing to Seattle's citizens. *Toward a Sustainable Seattle's* transportation element is more focused on general infrastructure initiatives rather than specific initiatives for its public transit fleet. However, the city has plans for both human-powered and public transit.

In human-powered transit, Seattle advocates both walking and bicycling. In the sustainability plan, the city wants to create infrastructure and roadways in a manner that caters directly to these types of transportation. In addition to advocating both of these types of transit in *Toward a Sustainable Seattle*, Seattle has separate plans for each, entitled the Seattle Bicycle Master Plan and the Seattle Pedestrian Master Plan. In the Pedestrian Master Plan, Seattle describes its initiatives to become America's Most Walkable City. The city plans to achieve this goal by making walking safer, more comfortable, and more convenient. The local government aims to create more green streets, or streets that give priority to pedestrians and open space over other transportation by widening sidewalks and calming traffic (City of Seattle 2009b).

In the Bicycle Master Plan, the city details how Seattle will attempt to become the best community for biking in the United States. Six-thousand people in Seattle's workforce currently use bikes as a primary mode of transportation. The city has

plans to have bicycle facilities on 62 percent of its arterial roadways and will have 230 miles of signed bike trails throughout the city (City of Seattle 2007). Seattle's initiatives in walking and biking are some of the most innovative in the United States. Although the comprehensive plan itself does not expand much on these two forms of transportation, the in-depth master plans for biking and walking are very effective at outlining how these forms of transportation will be improved and favored in the future.

In addition to advocating human-powered transit, Seattle promotes its state-of-the-art public transportation system. Not many specific initiatives are mentioned in the plan to make public transportation more sustainable, but the city boasts both hybrid-electric and biodiesel buses, both of which have fewer emissions than the standard diesel bus (City of Seattle 2011b). The city also has Bus Rapid Transit, which is designed to further reduce environmental impact and increase rider convenience. In this system, buses have more frequent stops (but at a greater distance between stops), have sensors allowing traffic lights to favor buses, and have more doors to allow passengers to enter and exit the bus more quickly.

In theory, Bus Rapid Transit would drastically decrease riding time and allow buses to navigate city streets much more quickly than the conventional bus system. However, this is not necessarily the case in Seattle. Despite all of the effort put into making the bus system more efficient, critics complain that the ride time on any given bus is nearly the same as on a regular bus (Constant 2010). It would be beneficial for the city to either implement better methods to significantly decrease

bus rapid transit time or to focus on other ways to make bus transit more sustainable.

Seattle currently uses both hybrid diesel and electric trolley buses for its public transit. With the electric trolley bus fleet expiring in roughly three years, Seattle is currently looking into options about how to replace the fleet. The city will continue to use both the electric trolley and diesel-hybrid buses, both, of which satisfy the city's criteria. (King County Metro 2011). Overall, Seattle's plans and current initiatives for transportation are far ahead of those of most North American cities, and the city will continue to improve upon its already innovative transit systems.

Although *Toward a Sustainable Seattle* does not have a section devoted specifically to food production and waste removal, the city of Seattle has exceptional initiatives in both of these areas. Many of Seattle's food-related initiatives involve promoting locally grown food. The Local Food Action Initiative strives to strengthen Seattle's food system in a sustainable and secure way. The program achieves these goals through assessment of ecological and environmental impacts of various food production methods, stimulation of demand for healthy food, and increase in availability for healthy foods (City of Seattle 2011d). In addition, the city has numerous public farmer's markets located throughout the city where citizens can go to purchase healthy, locally grown produce. Seattle is also a big advocate of growing one's own food through backyard and community gardening. The practice of community gardening will be discussed much more in-depth in the next section of the paper, as this practice is arguably Seattle's strongest.

In addressing the issue of waste, Seattle possesses a waste removal strategy that is crucial to making recycling and garbage disposal more sustainable. The city's Zero Waste Strategy is Seattle's plan to reduce specific wastes in various areas of the city. The program allows citizens to opt out of receiving phone books in addition to offering better recycling methods, puts a fee on disposable shopping bags, and prohibits Styrofoam containers at all fast food restaurants in the city (City of Seattle 2011c). Despite being left out of the comprehensive plan, Seattle's food and waste initiatives are very thorough and rival those of other leading American cities.

Probably Seattle's most lacking sustainability initiatives come in the area of green business and jobs. The city government has few stated goals or programs to create these jobs, and the ones that currently exist are not very successful. In an article on the website of Komo News, a local news network, the author discusses one of Seattle's recent unsuccessful attempts to create green jobs in the city. In 2010, Seattle won a twenty-million dollar grant to invest in weatherization in homes. The goal was to put 2,000 people to work retrofitting 2,000 homes. A year later, only three homes had been weatherized and only fourteen jobs were created. Seattle poorly planned this attempt to create green jobs and to retrofit buildings, making it difficult for homes and buildings to get the funding to weatherize (Ho 2011). The lack of green jobs initiatives in Seattle's plans remains a trivial issue compared to all of the city's strong initiatives. However, it is important that Seattle becomes more active in trying to promote green business and jobs throughout the city. Having exceptional and successful initiatives in green business and jobs would give Seattle very good sustainability practices in almost every major category.

In summary, Seattle's comprehensive plan, *Toward a Sustainable Seattle*, provides remarkable ideas and goals for sustainable initiatives. It has exceptional plans for urban design, transportation, and energy, while it has shortcomings in green business and jobs initiatives. The plan comes across as too goal-oriented, and many of Seattle's current green practices were omitted from the plan. The plan should be more focused on policy and specific goals. In addition, the plan is too focused on the built environment, even in elements of the plan not focused on infrastructure. This could be because the plan is intended to be a guide to manage Seattle's growth, so almost all of the issues mentioned in the plan are actually related to the city's built environment. However, given the current conditions, *Toward a Sustainable Seattle* serves its purpose well, and will continue to do so until it becomes time to make a new one.

Best Practice: P-Patches (Community Gardening)

Of all of Seattle's sustainability practices, community gardening is undeniably the city's best practice. A community garden is a space where neighbors come together to grow food and build community. These gardens are typically publicly owned, but gardeners will pay a small annual fee to use a plot. These gardens, called P-Patches in Seattle, are part of Seattle's initiatives to promote local food production. There are currently 85 P-Patches spread throughout Seattle, and each of these is of a different size and is maintained by citizens of Seattle. There are many benefits associated with community gardens. These gardens bring people together, teach people about healthy and organic foods, and provide food for the homeless

(City of Seattle 2009a). The benefits of community gardens are numerous, and the city of Seattle is fortunate for this practice to have become so popular. The P-Patch program has grown drastically since its inception in the 1970s, becoming one of Seattle's sustainability icons.

The history of Seattle's P-Patches dates back to the 1970s at the Picardo family farm, the home of Seattle's first P-Patch. The Picardos were no longer financially able to maintain the farm, so they sold it to the city of Seattle, which used the land to create a community garden. The gardens were becoming popular in the green movement at the time. This first P-Patch was divided up into plots to be maintained by families at a nearby elementary school; the food would be donated to food banks and consumed by the families (City of Seattle 2009a). Seattle then authorized a community gardening program to make the city greener and to open up space. The new P-Patch Program grew from this original push to make the gardens city-maintained. (City of Seattle 2009a). By the end of the decade, Seattle and its P-Patch program had 16 gardens spread throughout neighborhoods in the city.

In 1979, the P-Patch Advisory Council was formed. This organization was put in charge of the P-Patches, and the program grew under its guidance. The city worked with the gardeners for land-tenure issues, and the city was able to provide new land and assistance if a garden had to be relocated. In 1995, the organization changed names yet again to Friends of P-Patch (Hess 2005). The organization continued to get land donations and expand the P-Patch program during this time until 2003, when the organization became the P-Patch Trust, the current name of

the P-Patch organization. At this time, the organization changed its governing format to a donor organization with a self-perpetuating board of directors (Hess 2005). Today, the P-Patch Trust works to acquire, build, preserve, and protect community gardens in Seattle's neighborhoods (P-Patch Trust 2011). Under the guidance of the P-Patch Trust, Seattle's community gardens are able to thrive today.

Seattle's P-Patches can be found all over the city today. With over 80 P-Patches currently in use, these gardens can be found in almost every one of Seattle's urban villages. The city of Seattle and the P-Patch Trust have tried to make the logistics of owning a plot and gardening as simple as possible. To get a plot and begin gardening, a citizen must put their name on the waitlist for a plot, specifying the size of the plot they want. The fees for the application and the annual fees for tending the plot are low, making community gardening appealing to people of all socioeconomic levels. Once the gardener gets off of the waitlist, he or she may begin gardening at any time (City of Seattle 2009a). Once the gardener has begun tending and maintaining the plot, he or she is free to use the vegetables grown however he or she likes. The gardeners are free to bring the vegetables back to their own households, share with other gardeners, or donate the produce to food banks.

In recent years, the city's P-Patches have donated seven to ten tons of produce to food banks in Seattle, showing that the gardens are truly capable of giving back to the community (Brown 1998). The flexibility provided by the P-Patches is probably what makes them so appealing to the citizens of Seattle. The gardens can be used in many different ways and serve many different functions. The P-Patch Trust wants the gardens to be for the community, so naturally the

committee wants to cooperate with gardeners to work out the best strategy for management of the gardens. A plan for the gardens developed by the P-Patch Trust called for one staff person for every twelve gardens. The city has not yet hit this level of management, but Seattle's community garden administration is easily the most involved of any other cities in the United States (Hess 2005). Seattle's relationship with its gardeners has allowed the program to grow and expand and become the model gardening community it has become.

Seattle's P-Patches thrive in the city for many reasons. The gardens, having been in existence in Seattle for forty years, have been under management for just as long, and the P-Patch trust works in the best interest of the gardeners. Land tenure is another major reason why community gardening has been so successful in Seattle in particular. Seattle's gardens are located on public land or land held by the P-Patch trust, decreasing the number of land-ownership related issues (Hess 2005). P-Patches do not experience many issues with theft either. Even in low-income areas, theft of the vegetables has not been an issue. Most citizens respect the gardens and only use them for their intended purposes. However, the community's support for its gardens is probably the main reason why P-Patches have thrived today. Many citizens exemplify incredible dedication to their gardens. An article published in the *Seattle Times* shows one woman's dedication to the Interbay P-Patch, right after it had been forced to be relocated for the third time in 20 years. Thanks to her dedication, along with that of many other gardeners, the Interbay P-Patch, the second largest in Seattle, is flourishing with produce (Brown 1998).

Clearly, the portability of Seattle's P-Patch program in other cities is dependent on their government involvement, support from the P-Patch Trust, and the number of staff members committed to community gardens. In Seattle, the strong government involvement coupled with the public's support for community gardens is the main reason why Seattle's P-Patches have been as successful as they are today. Seattle should serve as an example for other North American cities looking to improve their own community gardens. Seattle's P-Patches serve as community centers, while acting as a sustainable food production method and achieving environmental justice through food donation. Seattle's success with community gardening encourages the city and its citizens to grow their own food, creating a sustainable food production environment that continues to spread throughout Seattle. In the future, Seattle hopes to expand the community gardens to city parks and rooftops. Increasing the city's green space would both beautify the city and increase the number of people who would benefit from the P-Patches. As Seattle moves forward, the role of the P-Patch should continue to increase in the built environment, helping Seattle to become the greenest city in the United States.

Conclusion

Overall, the city of Seattle has done an excellent job planning and creating a sustainable living environment for its citizens. Seattle's Comprehensive Plan, *Toward a Sustainable Seattle*, addresses most of the important sustainability issues with both goals and policies designed to improve the city's green initiatives. The strongest initiatives already in place--transportation, energy, and urban design--are

among the best in North America, but the city still plans to improve even on these aspects of the built environment. The city is lacking initiatives to promote green business and jobs, and these initiatives should be better represented in the plan.

Many of Seattle's initiatives would not be difficult to emulate in other cities. Seattle's transportation initiatives are very portable; promoting human-powered and public transit is commonplace in almost every city. Seattle's food, waste, and urban design plans would be very feasible to carry over to other cities as well. However, Seattle's energy production methods would be more difficult for another city to imitate. Because of Seattle's location, the city is able to utilize natural resources like rivers for energy that other cities might not have access to.

Community gardening, the practice that sets Seattle apart from other green city leaders, flourishes in the city, and the city has done an excellent job to promote gardening as a source of food and a community building activity. Seattle's community gardens would be a successful addition for almost any city. The gardens are an excellent source of organic vegetables and increase neighborhood harmony; there are almost no downsides to this practice.

In general, Seattle's comprehensive plan is too focused on generic goals instead of specific policies and processes to improve the major sustainability issues. The plan could be improved drastically by suggesting legislature and specific practices to change or improve and how this could be done. Seattle's plan was written to outline growth through the year 2024. At this time, the city will most likely have another plan in place to define the city's growth toward a more sustainable Seattle. Drawing from other city's plans and initiatives and improving

upon its own, Seattle will continue to be a leader in the green movement and will serve as a model for other North American cities working towards a sustainable America.

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