

# Chapter 1 – Introduction

Highland Park is taking commendable steps to become a more sustainable community, and one important step is to undertake a green planning process. This report provides several key building blocks for the green planning process. It develops detailed data on current conditions and offers recommendations for improvements that will enhance the environmental and economic performance of Highland Park. It serves as a guide for the citizens, public employees, elected officials and businesses of Highland Park who are pursuing sustainable development.

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## 1.1 – Green Planning

The term *green planning* refers to the development of a comprehensive and integrated approach for achieving environmental and economic sustainability. Now used by a growing number of communities and businesses, green planning serves as a means to assure the long-term viability of these human endeavors.

Green planning dispels the widely held view that sustaining a healthy environment can be overwhelmingly difficult and economically disastrous. On the contrary, participants in the green planning process recognize that economic prosperity cannot be sustained unless the environmental systems that support life are maintained.

Communities that engage in green planning often integrate their environmental and economic goals into a broader context called sustainable development. Sustainable development seeks to expand on the aims of green planning by including the issues of social justice and equality along with those of environmental protection and economic development.

Environmental decline, in the United States and worldwide, continues to accelerate. As human population and economic activity increase, the negative affects associated with them ultimately affect local communities. These effects on local communities include the conversion of productive agricultural land and environmentally sensitive areas into homogeneous residential subdivisions and auto-dominated commercial strips.

While this development promises communities increased tax revenue to fund public services, the real effect has been one of higher taxes to keep up with the increasing demand for public services such as roads, water and sewer services. The sheer complexity and extent of today's environmental problems has outgrown the existing ways that government has dealt with them. The awareness of this problem in many communities motivates them to create new solutions that apply a "systems" thinking approach to environmental problems.

**"Today's problems cannot be solved by thinking the way we thought when we created them."  
-Albert Einstein**

Municipal governments and the citizens they serve have benefited greatly from the implementation of green planning strategies. Green Planning and its practices have attracted a number of cities and towns because of the potential of economic savings. Several of these are listed in Exhibit 1.1. A growing body of evidence indicates that sustainability investments generally yield a relatively short payback, leading to larger returns in investment (Resource Renewal Institute). The success of green plans shows that the capacity now exists to:

- Learn the lessons of environmental and economic sustainability;
- Apply those lessons in both the public and private sectors; and
- Begin a new era of environmental and economic prosperity.

<b>Exhibit 1.1 - Communities Implementing Green Plans</b>	
<b>US:</b>	<b>Internationally:</b>
Burlington, VT	Vancouver, BC
Santa Monica, CA	Bogota, Columbia
Portland, OR	Stirling, Australia
Seattle, WA	Viernheim, Germany
San Jose, CA	

## 1.2 – Elements of Green Planning

The pioneering efforts of Highland Park are similar in several ways to innovative efforts elsewhere. This section describes illustrative activities in Burlington, VT, Santa Monica, CA, and Viernheim, Germany. All share similar sustainability principles, indicators, and public education strategies.

### ***Principles***

National, state, regional and local governments can approach green planning in different ways. Each municipality that engages in green planning possesses unique characteristics—a specific set of environmental concerns, cultural history, and financial resources. All, however, can apply a set of overarching principles serve as a guide for future development. These principles include

- Economic development;
- Social equity; and
- Ecological responsibility.

The City of Burlington Vermont’s plan (population 38,000), for example, reflects these overarching principles. Their four specific principles of were uniquely labeled as Ecological Integrity, Empowerment and Responsibility, Economic Security and Social Well-Being. Based on these principles, Burlington drafted specific sustainable strategies that include reducing the dependence on the automobile, encouraging mixed-use development and multi-use structures, and supporting long-term solutions.

### ***Indicators***

Many municipalities now ask, “How do we recognize progress towards sustainability.” A critical component of success lies in the defining the “whats” and “hows” of green progress. Thus,

indicators are the measuring systems used to inform community members and politicians with the information necessary to make policy decisions. Communities often state policy goals through target-setting for a specific indicator. For example, if a community goal is to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, the community may set a goal to reduce emissions by a certain percentage by a given date.

An example of this indicator method can be found in the City of Santa Monica, California. Santa Monica established a series of indicators grouped into five broad categories: Resource Conservation, Environmental & Public Health, Transportation, Open Space & Land Use, and Community Education & Participation. For each of these groups, a specific set of indicators is also listed. Specific indicators, such as solid waste generation, energy use and water use are grouped under one of the overarching indicators – Resource Conservation. Each specific indicator is also paired with a target that is set by the community. For example, Santa Monica set a goal to increase recycling and composting to 70% of total waste generated by 2010. Finally, once the community has agreed to targets based on data from the indicators, an implementation or action plan can be produced. The plan serves to both publicize the community-wide targets and recommend policy change.

### ***Public Education***

The most effective method for the creation of sustainable communities proves to be engaging the citizenry. Municipalities with successful community sustainability programs, in Europe, the U.S., and elsewhere, have established programs that foster support and guide private sector and citizen-based sustainability efforts. Viernheim, Germany provides a leading example of a successful public awareness campaign with a goal of getting residents involved in transitioning towards a sustainable community. The City of Viernheim made a commitment to reduce green house gas emissions by 30 percent by the year 2010 – an aggressive goal. The City also provided economic incentives in the form of direct subsidies to residences for energy efficiency improvements in their homes. They recognized that economic subsidies would not be enough – a public awareness campaign would be essential if Viernheim was to achieve its goal.

The city established motivational and participatory programs that attempted to make the CO<sub>2</sub> reduction campaign fun and exciting. The city distributed books in which citizens collected “points” for completing activities such as energy efficient purchases. After reaching a certain number of “points”, citizens would receive a “CO<sub>2</sub> ball” from a centrally placed globe filled with a thousand balls. The “CO<sub>2</sub> balls” provided a physical reminder of the campaign, and served as a source of pride and personal accomplishment for the participating individuals.

Clearly, communities can promote green development in many ways. The examples listed in the above paragraphs represent only a few. Communities that succeed in their green or sustainable planning efforts take the time to

- Articulate their principles;
- Determine those indicators that measure their progress;
- Set goals based on the indicators; and
- Engage the public to support the green planning efforts.

## 1.3 – Highland Park Green Planning - Past, Present & Future

Highland Park, in an effort to become a green community, has created a strong foundation for future actions in resource conservation, environmental public education/awareness and greener building. They have done this with the help of committed governmental leadership and community volunteer groups. The following outline details the progress that Highland Park has made as part of its plan to become an environmentally sustainable community – including studies, implementation and organization.

### ***Environmental Plans and Studies***

Boasting a history of environmental awareness, Highland Park has already developed a number of planning documents which focus on environmental sustainability and green planning. These studies provide important environmental data that can be used for future green planning:

- **Highland Park 2020 – A Sustainable Community.** This plan, which was unveiled in 2003 by Mayor Meryl Frank, serves as a green planning blueprint for the future of the Borough to become environmentally, economically and socially sustainable by 2020.
- **2003 Highland Park Master Plan.** The master plan has a large section devoted to recommendations for the need to acquire and preserve open space for environmental sustainability.
- **2002 Open Space Inventory.** This inventory was prepared as part of the Environmental Commission's Open Space Plan to provide the local government and public information and proposed recommendations for open Space in Highland Park.
- **2001 Community Forestry Management Plan.** The plan uses scientific guidelines for street tree management in the Borough. It was officially approved by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) in 2002.
- **1994 Greenway Feasibility Study.** This document studied the feasibility of creating a riverfront greenway to link with the Middlesex County river greenway.

### ***Green Planning Implementation***

The Borough has also taken previous green actions on its path towards environmental sustainability:

- **Native Plant Reserve.** This three acre reserve contains a wide variety of native plants as well as signage that supplies educational information. The reserve's soil has also gone through extensive restoration to help bring back the original wetland quality. The reserve won an EPA Environmental Quality award in 2000.
- **Greenway path to Donaldson Park.** This path to the park from the Southside Bikeway is the first completed portion of a plan for greenway sites all around the edge of the Raritan River. The greenway consists of a bicycle path with associated nature trails.
- **Planting of Street Trees.** The Borough has a history of shade tree plantings through its urban forestry management program. Over 100 trees were planted recently as part of an effort to increase native trees in the community.
- **Raritan River Environmental Education Center.** The Center, to be built on a site at the Native Plant Reserve, will provide environmental educational resources to both schoolchildren and adults through 'hands-on' and traditional teaching methods. Plans call to eventually expand the center by creating satellite centers throughout the Borough. The proposed glass-walled building will include passive solar design, a "green roof" of plants, partial earth sheltering and active solar panels that will power the electrical needs of the center. Native

plants and educational signage will be placed around the exterior. Construction will begin in 2005.

- **Environmentally Preferred Purchasing.** The Borough will implement an environmentally preferable purchasing cooperative in association with surrounding communities. Purchasing specifications will be based on those currently being employed by Rutgers University in neighboring New Brunswick.
- **Public Building Green Retrofitting.** The Borough will retrofit public buildings with energy efficient fixtures such as photovoltaic roof tile systems and low-flow plumbing fixtures.
- **Walk Safe Highland Park.** This program involves studying the possibility of using a commuter Alternate Energy Shuttle service to New Brunswick.
- **Referendum for greening of Borough schools.** A School Board bond issue referendum at the end of 2004 garnered funds for rehabilitating school buildings according to green principles. Green design elements include a ground source heat pump (Irving School), replacement of impermeable surfaces (Irving School and the Middle School), and double-glazed windows and HVAC efficiency improvements (Irving School, the Middle School and Bartle School).
- **New Garden at the Senior/Youth center.** This handicap-accessible garden will open to the public in 2005 as part of the Borough's centennial year celebration.
- **Trail improvements in 'The Meadows.'** This 16 acre parcel of woods, marshland and meadows at the southeastern end of the Borough is scheduled to undergo trail improvements as part of the riverside greenway/environmental education project.
- **New pocket parks.** Currently, four of these parks exist in the Borough. Two more of these smaller parks are planned to be constructed in the near future.

### ***Municipal Environmental Committees and Commissions***

Several environmental organizations have been formed in Highland Park to analyze, initiate and implement environmental strategies within the Borough. They include:

- **Highland Park Environmental Commission.** This commission conducts research into the use of open land areas of the Borough, keeps an index of all public or private open areas and makes recommendations to the planning board for the use of these lands. The group also publishes an educational website which provides the community with extensive environmental news and information.
- **Shade Tree Advisory Committee.** This Borough committee advises the Borough on plantings for public open spaces and parks. They are responsible for maintaining an inventory of shade trees and also have formulated a comprehensive master plan for planting and maintenance of shade trees. They also were the guiding force for the design of the Native Plant Reserve
- **Green Community Working Group.** This appointed group promotes awareness of green practices among the various stakeholders in the Borough.

### ***Greening Highland Park***

This chapter introduced basic green planning tenets, as well as Highland Park's commitment to participate in this green planning process. The following chapters will cover resource conservation; environmental and public health; housing; economic development; transportation; green infrastructure; and public education/marketing.

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