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Making EcoDistricts: City-scale Climate Action One Neighborhood at a Time

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Introduction

In 2009, the City of Portland adopted an ambitious Climate Action Plan. (City of Portland and Multnomah County, October, 2009) Portland first adopted its CO₂ reduction strategy in 1993 and has emissions in 2010 10% below 1990 levels. With the 2009 plan, Portland has committed to building on that record of innovation and success and to seek a reduction of 80% below 1990 levels by 2050. The Plan calls for Portland to take action under 8 broad categories, including specific actions targeted at urban form, building efficiency, community engagement, government operations and food and agriculture. Central to all of these is the engagement of the people of Portland in a partnership to make goal achievement a high priority.

Since the late 1970s, Portland has developed city-scale initiatives that, like the Climate Action Plan, depend on citizen support and action. (Johnson, 2004) Citywide initiatives for recycling and solid waste reduction, bicycling and multimodal transportation, and habitat recovery have been directed at enabling Portland residents to make a different set of choices that, in aggregate, have made the City one of America's most sustainable (Greenbiz, 2008; Sustainlane, 2006; Svoboda, 2008). The geography used by the City to reach citizens while, at the same time, striving for results at scale, has been based on neighborhoods.

As part of its approach to meeting Climate Action Plan goals, the City of Portland has joined with the Portland Sustainability Institute (PoSI) to create "EcoDistricts" in Portland neighborhoods to seek neighborhood engagement on behalf of city climate action goals. EcoDistricts, like neighborhoods, offer a scale at which individuals can be affective and empowered to make climate-positive choices, but in a manner that can scale up to make citywide climate action real. PoSI defines an EcoDistrict as:

“... a neighborhood or district that has committed to achieving ambitious sustainability performance goals over time. EcoDistricts commit to achieving ambitious sustainability performance goals, guiding district investments and community action, and tracking the results over time” (PoSI, June 2010A, page 7)

According to PoSI, EcoDistricts are characterized by values of diversity and participation, equity in decision-making and investment, health and well-being of the community, positive environmental impacts, and conservation and stewardship. (PoSI, June 2010A, page 10) The process for developing an EcoDistrict is described as moving through four stages:

- 1) Engagement to Governance – creating a shared vision and agreeing on a mechanism for governing the EcoDistrict, its projects and potential investments.
- 2) Assessment and Strategy Development – developing an understanding of the challenges faced by the community to meet the ambitious performance goals, and the creation of specific strategies to meet those goals.
- 3) Feasibility and Project Implementation – the interaction of the EcoDistrict with PoSI, the City, and other key stakeholders to assess the catalytic potential of various strategies and investments, and the development of an implementation strategy.
- 4) Ongoing Monitoring – ongoing evaluation of the impacts of and lessons learned from implementing the strategies, and the modification of or development of new strategies as a result. (PoSI, June 2010A, pages 15 and 16)

Neighborhood-Scale Sustainability

Making Portland a sustainable city, in PoSI’s view, means seeing the challenges of sustainability as ones attributable to processes of community development and the creation of new social/cultural norms. The scale at which this can happen and make the most sense to individual households is at the neighborhood scale.

However, neighborhoods need to have a say in this as well. What do neighborhoods care about? For that matter, what is a neighborhood? In the PoSI Framework, we find the following:

“For the purposes of the EcoDistricts initiative, the terms “district” and “neighborhood” are used interchangeably. Both refer to a particular scale that is the planning unit of modern cities with a spatially or community-defined geography. Boundaries may include neighborhood or business association boundaries, urban renewal areas, local and business improvement districts, major redevelopment sites, watersheds, or geographic demarcations, as appropriate.” (PoSI, June 2010A, page 19)

The term “neighborhood” has real meaning in the Portland context. Since the late 1970s, the City of Portland has consciously identified neighborhood associations, with 94 recognized associations today covering 100% of the land area of the city. Together, they

scale up, institutionally and intentionally, to the scale of the entire City. Neighborhood-based efforts, then, offer the real possibility of achieving city-scale impacts.

In addition, since the native geography of sustainability extends far beyond the boundaries of the City itself, to watersheds, national resource policy, State and Federal investments, food systems, global agreements, and other realms, making neighborhoods sustainable will ultimately require City intervention in larger units on their behalf. The existing structure of neighborhoods and neighborhood associations in Portland makes this possible. Knowing more about what the neighborhoods want, then, will be key to better understanding, on the part of PoSI, the City, and neighborhood residents themselves, whether the EcoDistricts Initiative is a useful vehicle for accomplishing neighborhood, and citywide sustainability and climate action goals.

We can glean some insights about the relationship between neighborhood objectives and these larger citywide initiatives through two projects recently carried out by Masters students in the Toulan School of Urban Studies and Planning. In 2009, a group of students completed the “Neighborhood Climate Change Planning Handbook” for their client, Southeast Uplift, the district neighborhood coalition and service provider in inner-Southeast Portland. That project was developed to see if there were ways to engage neighborhoods in planning for, mitigating, and adapting to climate change. Their operating assumption was that climate change was too big an issue for any single neighborhood to work with effectively, but that neighborhoods, in this case Portland neighborhood associations, could “fill the gap between the individual and activity at higher levels.” (C-Change Consultants, 2009, Forward)

What they proposed was to respond to this global crisis through community building, planning, and acting at the neighborhood scale. They found that climate change is a topic that can bring people together to talk about the future for their neighborhood and world, work on projects together that make the community stronger and a better place to live, create the context for information sharing and engagement, and ultimately result in new and better articulated neighborhood visions and goals.

The process that they described for engaging this topic revolved around three steps: 1) get organized; 2) assess needs and priorities; and 3) identify strategies for meeting needs and advancing goals. Significantly, they found that the process needed to start with articulating community needs and then, and only then, make the link to actions that had benefits for responding to climate change. (C-Change Consultants, 2009, page 50)

In 2010, another group of students developed the “Gateway EcoDistrict Pilot Study” for PoSI. This project was an assessment of the application of the EcoDistrict Initiative to a PoSI-identified pilot EcoDistrict in Portland, the Gateway Urban Renewal Area. Their report begins with an assessment of site conditions and community priorities. They found that connectivity, community/place identity, and security and appearance were key community concerns. They stated that:

“Community members asserted that any EcoDistrict proposal must address the area’s specific needs in order to be successful. While the EcoDistrict concept was well-received, environmental performance was not the highest priority.”
(DistrictLab, 2010, page 2)

They went on to state that there was a general and shared concept of sustainability, but no agreement as to what it should mean in Gateway. In particular, they reported that the community resisted using the PoSI performance areas as a framework for articulating community issues or goals. (DistrictLab, 2010, page 20) Stakeholders were, however, positive when the EcoDistrict performance areas could be shown to address community needs and concerns. (DistrictLab, 2010, page 24) They saw a key challenge for the EcoDistrict Initiative to be the organization and mobilization of willing participants. (DistrictLab, 2010, page 65)

From both of these experiences we can conclude that there is real opportunity for pursuing sustainability citywide through engaging neighborhoods and neighborhood associations in Portland. However, it is unclear whether neighborhood associations will easily or initially gravitate to the EcoDistrict Initiative as the basis for describing their needs and goals. If the EcoDistrict Initiative can demonstrate its ability to advance neighborhood aspirations as defined by the neighborhoods themselves, sustainability in terms relevant to their circumstances, then the potential is great for making a major impact on citywide sustainability since the effort can then be applied to every neighborhood in the City.

The question becomes: what needs to be done to enable communities to self-manage their resource-using behavior by creating community-inspired interventions that change relationships between people, and between people and place? To answer this question and to contribute to the emerging practice of EcoDistrict formation and development, we received generous support from the Bullitt Foundation to investigate ways for bringing a “people first” EcoDistrict strategy into focus. (The entire “Making EcoDistricts” report can be downloaded at: <http://www.pdx.edu/usp/faculty-research>) The report was presented at the 2010 PoSI EcoDistrict Summit in Portland.

Making EcoDistricts

The “Making EcoDistricts” report considers ways that neighborhoods can be engaged in better understanding the cumulative impacts of household choices, the issues associated with creating greater synergy at the neighborhood scale, and the challenges of realizing returns to scale. It begins with the presentation of a prototypical process for organizing neighborhoods that author Tim Smith, terms “civic ecology.” He writes that:

“Civic Ecology is the integrated web of energy, nutrient, resource, financial, information, and cultural flows and interactions that are envisioned, created and managed by citizens acting for the common good within a geographically-defined community and its city-region. It is a human ecology of place, intimately integrating both natural and social/culture systems.”

And:

“The Civic Ecology framework provides an opportunity for such transformative change through its five core qualities: 1) a whole systems approach to community making; 2) a focus on community place; 3) a requirement for the creation of a new social contract that empowers stronger democracy and social capital in the community-making enterprise; 4) a focus through these means on identifying shared community needs and capacities as a basis for action; and 5) identifying specific strategies for maintaining the open-ended, adaptive capability critical to achieving community sustainability.”

Smith distinguishes between the “hardware” of sustainability – pipes, devices, buildings, etc. – and the “software” – relationships between people, meaning, flows in and through the community, etc. He views civic ecology as a new model for viewing and understanding acting on goals for sustainability within the community, one echoing the findings above, that is profoundly embedded in the life and aspirations of the community, the “placeways” that stem from the community’s own identity, values, and desires. Importantly, he makes distinctions between community action in a local versus global context, and between expectations for consumption and resource use based on old assumptions versus those accompanying real sustainability.

Clearly, this is hard work. Sustainability is not about finding new ways to not change things, to enable old patterns to continue indefinitely. It’s ultimately associated with changing behaviors, relationships, and expectations, and that raises the real and important questions of ethics and equity. Asking communities at a distance from relatively easy changes for meeting goals for sustainability to embrace those goals as heartily as communities and households faced with a relatively easier path is not realistic or, in many cases, fair.

Nonetheless, at the heart of the civic ecology model is the expectation that the community is in control of the agenda and actions that affect them, and in need of links to bigger institutions and systems. Needed here is not just a local willingness to proceed, but a higher level desire to recognize and empower. The two must work together.

If a community chooses to pursue civic ecology as a strategy for making an EcoDistrict, Smith suggests that they will find five major benefits. First, civic ecology is locally controlled. This is a means for communities to speak both to themselves and to the broader city and world about what they need to do and how they’ll do it, and how and when sustainability, as a goal, comes to the fore.

Second, the civic ecology framework creates real and enduring value. Smith identifies benefits accruing to all forms of capital – physical, monetary, environmental, and social – as a result of proceeding with the civic ecology model in mind.

Third, using civic ecology as a guide will create greater resilience for the neighborhood or district. New relationships and resources provide a broader palette of options for dealing with the inevitable challenges to community cohesion and stability, and to the

well-being of households coming from dynamics much larger than the community itself or, often, even the city or state within which it is located.

Fourth, as should now be apparent, a key outcome is a stronger community, something that all communities have as a critical concern. By proceeding with an organizing model, one of the consequences of this approach is a better organized neighborhood, with a more articulate local agenda for change. Finally, using civic ecology as a framework for thinking and acting holds the promise of creating a “living culture” in the neighborhood:

“Community-building and city-making are never done. They are intergenerational projects that result in a community DNA, the coding that describes to present and future residents of the place what it means to be a citizen of that place and what the rules and norms are that underpin the way resources are allocated. Included in this are the values and visions of the community as well as the means to measure progress and steer the boat. It enables the community to sustain itself and prosper and tells citizens what needs to be done to keep it so. In the end this may be the most important benefit of all.”

Smith proposes a five-step process acting on the civic ecology framework that he has named “**CIVIC**”: Convening, Investigating, Visioning, Implementing and Charting progress. This process resembles the visioning process used by local communities in the Portland region since the early 1990s. However, it differs from them by focusing explicitly on community flows, sustainability, and grassroots action. In his chapter, he provides a description of how to apply the five steps of the CIVIC process, and concludes with a series of questions needing additional thought and action:

- Can neighborhoods be the loci for innovation, the kind of innovation needed to make the promise of EcoDistricts real?
- What kind of governance framework is needed at the neighborhood level to enable EcoDistricts to not simply be created, but to become vehicles for the day-in-day-out business of realizing goals for sustainability?
- How can we know whether the practice of Civic Ecology has yielded outcomes for sustainability that are both important locally and able to be scaled up into the outcomes needed to make Portland a more sustainable city?
- If communities utilize Civic Ecology as a means for becoming more sustainable, what might that suggest for the nature of plans and planning in a city like Portland?

Joe Cortright directly addresses the inter-related issues of innovation, place, and scale. In his chapter, he takes on three inter-related groups of questions:

- **Geography, Scale, and Sustainability:** Is it global, national, metropolitan, neighborhood or individual? How do we achieve and measure sustainability at each of these different scales? In this section of the chapter, Cortright acknowledges the advantages of using small scales, like neighborhoods, to relatively rapidly test concepts for broader use. However, if scaling up is an

important purpose, it needs to be identified and committed to at the outset. To not do so would be to engage in projects that give the illusion of great sustainability but are, in actual fact, only about the association of sustainability with certain places or groups.

Furthermore, some things that work at the EcoDistrict scale may not scale up at all. He identifies selection bias, an unwillingness to properly price resource use, and a general inability to properly account for externalities as critical issues when working at relatively small scales, as found in neighborhoods. In this case, seeking results at greater scales could actually end up harming the overall effort. If everybody in an EcoDistrict faced a price of gasoline of \$5.00 a gallon, it would change their behavior, but it wouldn't be enough to shift the investment plans of electric car manufacturers, or solar energy companies, or others. In fact the small scale pricing experiment would emphasize the pain (whacking demand) without much of the gain (stimulating viable alternatives).

- **Technology and Culture:** What is the mix of physical characteristics of community and human behavior that will be required to achieve sustainability? In this part of the chapter, Cortright discusses the requirement that sustainability efforts must combine a mix of physical and behavioral strategies.
- **Innovation and Place:** How are new ideas brought to bear in particular places in ways that lead to more sustainable communities and living? Here, Cortright considers the literature about innovation, and the critical roles played by users. In the case of neighborhoods, the democratic and open “crowdsourcing” of solutions and objectives is of paramount importance for the nurturing and emergence of innovation.

Cortright concludes that EcoDistricts will need to wrestle with questions of scale and with the advantages and disadvantages of pursuing neighborhood-based and scaled innovation.

Ellen Bassett examines what governance can and should mean in the effort to make neighborhood sustainability a vehicle for citywide sustainability. She utilizes cases studies of neighborhood governance efforts in Los Angeles, Portland, and elsewhere, and Business Improvement Districts as a means for exploring the challenges of establishing neighborhood-scale governance structures for EcoDistricts. Bassett contributes five insights for PoSI and others interested in moving forward with creating EcoDistricts in Portland:

Insight 1: Successful governance institutions have strongly shared goals; these emerge according to circumstances/felt need and influence the form governance takes

Insight 2: Legitimacy is paramount; leadership must be representative and accountability to residents must be clear.

Insight 3: All governance institutions are not created equal—the need for capacity building and commitment of government resources should not be underestimated.

Insight 4: Respective responsibilities between institutions (within hierarchy and across same levels of power) must be clear

Insight 5: Evaluation must be built into governance experiments

Finally, Vivek Shandas tackles the question of what it means to evaluate outcomes, and what the practice of measurement, ongoing monitoring, and reflection means for sustainability more generally. Shandas draws our attention to the many city measurement efforts now underway, and the exceptional amount of effort going into measuring outcomes associated with sustainability. He reminds us that neighborhood-based sustainability is about “place,” and that though measuring attributes of form and function associated with place is important, those measurements are largely out of context without recognizing the “meaning” associated with those places.

However, measuring meaning is extremely difficult and neighborhood-scale frameworks are currently being developed. Nonetheless, to leave meaning out can potentially result in the creation of measures that draw attention to the wrong things, and may induce actions that are actually counterproductive if not ethically questionable. To begin to create measurement systems able to integrate form, function, and meaning, he proposes 6 guidelines for practitioners:

- 1) Discern the meaning of place;
- 2) Establish baseline measurement;
- 3) Distinguish between the measurement of systems, policy outcomes, and feedbacks;
- 4) Balance goal-orientation and process-orientation;
- 5) Emphasize resident-held spatial dimensions of place; and
- 6) Allow the data to inform perspectives.

Shandas concludes by reminding us that measurement “can both enable and constrain a community’s ability to control the direction of change.” He notes that this is important for the EcoDistrict Initiative because of the challenges of merging regional-level desires for sustainability with local level concerns described in terms of community needs, issues, and aspirations. Simply seeking the acceleration of the achievement of sustainability may, and probably will, run roughshod over the need to engage all citizens and their concerns in the challenges associated with making cities like Portland better places to live.

People Matter Most

What can we conclude, overall, from the “Making EcoDistricts” report? Can EcoDistricts be a useful vehicle for achieving bold, citywide goals for climate action? First, sustainability is achieved over time. It’s not the product of a program, project, or initiative, though all these things are important and help. Instead, Portland will become a

more sustainable city when the links between sustainability, people, place, and the myriad decisions made daily in the course of inhabiting the city get consciously related to a set of sustainable behavioral norms. The report suggests that every neighborhood is sustainable just as it is if the people live in the neighborhood choose to inhabit it in a manner that contributes to sustainability. The EcoDistrict Initiative has to be thought of in the context of building and stewarding long-term commitments to sustainability, and making sustainable choices in a consistent and leveraged manner.

Second, the neighborhood scale offers an important opportunity for cities seeking to become more sustainable. Sharing a neighborhood can lead meaningfully to sharing an interest in articulating and achieving goals for sustainability in ways that are simply out of reach for too many citizens at the citywide scale. The neighborhood scale overcomes the limitations of addressing sustainability goals a household or a building at a time, and because neighborhoods often have a role in city processes for governance and resource allocation, the prospect of scaling up from individual neighborhoods is real.

That said, realizing the benefits of EcoDistrict formation at the scale of the city makes boundaries and definitions important. Fundamentally, a wide-ranging assortment of EcoDistricts means that some will scale up and some won't. A diversity of types and boundaries also means that basic power relations go unchallenged, impinging on the ability for sustainability to mean an increase in equity conditions in society. If a neighborhood commits to bringing everyone along, that commitment should and must be rewarded by the city in ways that are materially different than the application of EcoDistrict concepts to projects or single-purpose districts.

Again, the big goal is a more sustainable city, in this case Portland. Getting there means that smaller scale initiatives, though necessary, must be conceived and implemented with this larger goal in mind, and within the larger scale of the City at the outset. However, working at the neighborhood scale is by no means a substitute for pursuing initiatives that ought to occur at the scale of the city and above. EcoDistricts should be envisioned as one among a number of efforts ranging in scale from the household all the way up to the bioregion.

Scales are important, each has specific roles to play, and a more sustainable city will result not from the abdication of roles, but from their interplay. This is not a small challenge. Cities seeking to remake themselves in truly sustainable ways need to care, at the outset, about boundaries and definitions in far more concrete terms than has occurred to date.

The native scales for biophysical systems (water, energy, habitat, transportation, etc.) are different than the institutional systems for political decisionmaking (nations, states, metropolitan regions, cities) are different than the scale at which households are directly empowered to make changes in consumption and norms (house, block, neighborhood). Finding links that enable decisions at one scale to leverage greater benefits at other scales is critically important for making cumulative patterns of inhabitation more sustainable in the fullest sense of the word.

Finally, when it comes to sustainability, people matter most. Keeping this principle firmly in view will be the best insurance that the results of city investment in neighborhood sustainability actions are likely to lead to the kinds of retooled social and cultural relationships and the new norms needed to create real sustainability. Again, sustainability is the legacy of a generation, not the outcome of an initiative or an investment. Every place is sustainable, but those living and working in those places may or may not be willing to take the steps necessary to realize that goal.

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