

Sustainable Community Development ¹

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Overview

This document explores the idea of sustainable community development and what this type of development can do to improve the quality of life within communities. This document examines what sustainable development entails and provides examples of the threats to quality of life that traditional approaches to development can generate. This document outlines six steps to a more sustainable approach to community development.

Sustainable Community Development

Sustainable communities are:

- **Environmentally Sound:** Decision-making focuses on reducing the impacts of population growth and development on natural resources and the environment.
- **Economically Productive:** Community members make local capital investments that will sustain local human and natural resources and yield adequate financial returns to those investments.
- **Socially Just:** Equitable access to resources and decision-making processes foster the distribution of foods and benefits across all sectors to the community.

Imagine a community where the air and water are clean, water supplies fully meet demand, everyone enjoys access to locally supplied safe and healthy foods, wildlife

flourishes, and the landscape is pleasing to the eye. Within this community, full participation and a spirit of cooperation pervade decision-making. People have an impact over their community's future. The community revitalizes the city center, reduces sprawl, and promotes regional identity and pride. Public transportation effectively reduces congestion and pollution from cars, reduces transportation costs, and improves access to jobs and services. The community has established a living wage standard for all employees. A strong emphasis on education and training for all promotes an improved quality of life and fosters future opportunities for the community's youth.

Far from being simply an exercise in imagination, communities across the nation are creating visions of sustainable development for their communities. Sarasota, Florida, provides a good example of how communities can turn a potential problem into an opportunity for sustainable development. This Florida city faced growing issues of urban growth and sprawl, environmental deterioration, traffic congestion, and water scarcity by the mid-1990s. Civic, public, and private partnerships formed to establish sustainable development goals and to initiate projects and programs to address these issues. The [Sarasota County Roadmap to a Sustainable and Renewable Community](#) provides a record of achievement and even bigger goals for the future. A public-private partnership of the Sarasota County Cooperative Extension Service and the Florida House Foundation created the Florida House Learning Center to promote sustainable development in residential settings in

1. This document is FCS7213-Eng, one of a series of the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date September 2003. Revised June 2014 and May 2017. Visit the EDIS website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

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1994. The county implemented an integrated pest management program for all county facilities in 1991. In 1993, the Florida Yards and Neighborhood Program was started to reduce chemical and water use, and in 2003 Neighborhood Environmental Stewardship Teams were established. Today, the county's [Sarasota 2050](#) plan incorporates sustainability in many aspects of government, business, and citizen's lives and provides a long term vision for the community.

Trends Threatening Florida's Communities

Florida's population grew by 32.7 percent in the 1980s, 23.5 percent during the 1990s, and 17.6 percent in the 2000s. Population growth in Florida declined during the height of the recession in the late 2000s but continued to grow, primarily from international and domestic migration. Florida's population is estimated at 20.1 million as of 2016, a gain of 7.2 percent from 2010 to 2016 (Office of Economic & Demographic Research, 2017). Florida's urban areas sprawl over formerly rural land—natural habitats, farmland, and scenic open-spaces—often converted to strip malls, housing developments, and low-density commercial development (Kolankiewicz and Beck, 2000). Uncontrolled growth has created environmental, social, and economic problems that threaten to destroy the very attractions that made many move to the state and that both native Floridians and newcomers value highly.

Population growth drives consumption of natural resources (such as energy and water), increases pollution, and encourages destruction of natural habitats. Florida ranks third in residential energy use in the United States. Florida households consume about 1,141 kWh of electricity per household per month, which is 26.6% more than the average for the United States (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2016). Energy use is closely related to population size, and the growth rates of the two are nearly the same in Florida. The relationships between population growth and environmental quality are similar for other resources that affect the lives of Florida's citizens. For example, water pollution from fertilizers, oil, and other petroleum products that leak from our cars, and chemicals we use in our households and on our lawns increase as our population grows.

A Focus on the Community

Florida, like most of the nation, needs a plan of action to better address environmental, social, and economic development. Seen at the state level, Florida's problem may appear too great and the solutions too elusive for effective

action. But, problems like urban sprawl, environmental degradation, and social injustice become personal and real in our communities where we live and work. We face these problems at the community level and we can solve them at the community level. For example, the UN World Commission on the Environment and Development defined sustainable development as development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” At the community level, these abstract goals need to be translated into concrete, effective action (World Commission on Environment & Development, 1987).

Each community must develop its own vision and plan of action. There is no single definition of sustainable community development, because every community has its own unique characteristics and challenges. Yet sustainable communities share common themes and concerns: economic security, environmental protection, social justice, and a commitment to the welfare of future generations.

Sustainable communities recognize that their economic and social structures and the health of the local environment are intertwined. They understand that programs and policies that foster only one aspect of development, be it economic growth, social gain, or environmental protection, to the exclusion of the other two aspects will not promote sustained progress for the community. For instance, consumers take into account how local farms protect the environment and contribute to the local economy when they make their food purchasing decisions. Natural resource managers consider the capacity of the community in terms of not just natural capital, but human, social, and physical capital capacity to maintain the population when they make their decisions. Leaders look beyond short-term outcomes and conflicts to identify and build upon the long-term shared interests among their members.

Taking Action

In order to implement a strategy for sustainable development, members of the community must believe that they have the capacity to resolve their own problems and shape their own future. A spider's web looks fragile, but it can withstand extraordinary force with little damage. Strengthening the community's capacity is like weaving a web that creates a social network throughout the community, providing support for all and extending and strengthening cooperation and collaboration among people, institutions, organizations, and businesses. Even if it starts small, the network expands and incorporates more and more of the stakeholders. The network increases community cohesion

and resilience through innovative partnerships, increased collaboration, and a shared vision of the future.

Sustainable community initiatives, like those in Sarasota County, deal with global issues at the local level. There are many paths to sustainable development, as many as there are communities. The following steps may help your community build and implement a sustainable vision of its own. Click on the links to get to the other documents in this series.

1. [Get stakeholder agreement on implementing a sustainability program.](#)
2. [Conduct a community assessment.](#)
3. [Create a community vision and develop a roadmap for reaching that vision.](#)
4. [Develop sustainability indicators to measure progress.](#)
5. [Identify sources of help.](#)
6. [Carry out projects and monitor, evaluate, and make adjustments as needed.](#)

References

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