

# The Catalysts for Intellectual Capital 2020



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## **Local Governments and Sustainability: How Local Governments Can Attract and Retain Talent**

**Leading from the Confluence**

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### **Abstract**

The concept of sustainability has gained momentum in the global economy as environmental issues have become increasingly dire. Research shows how local governments are creating programs that require civic engagement and the involvement of the profit and nonprofit sectors in order to achieve more sustainable practices within communities. These efforts have been shown to revitalize the economy and provide a quality of place that can attract and retain talented professionals. Examining existing literature that analyzes the programs local

governments have pursued in order to achieve sustainability, this paper investigates why partnerships with local residents are necessary, and provides an analysis of the benefits of sustainability programs.

**Keywords:** Sustainability, Civic Engagement, Local Governments, Community Building, Attraction, Retention, Talent

## **Introduction**

The City of Binghamton's government is paving the way for a bright, sustainable future by promoting both progressive and imperative initiatives aimed at developing the local business sector, allying with the profit and nonprofit sectors, and involving local citizens. In an effort to explore how crucial these practices are in achieving a sustainable community, this paper will examine literature that outlines the necessity of strategic partnerships in creating the required behavior and values needed to maintain a sustainable city. This paper will then focus on which sustainable projects are affordable and beneficial for local governments to pursue. Placed into the categories of food, energy, and small businesses, these initiatives not only achieve a more sustainable society, but also stimulate the local economy and build a stronger community. Then this paper will offer an overview and analysis of Binghamton's admirable sustainability efforts that are necessary to create a quality of life essential in attracting and retaining talent in the area, and will conclude with recommendations for Binghamton's future by using the explored

research.

## **Research**

A huge barrier exists in achieving sustainability due to the economic concern that traditional economic growth and sustainability efforts clashed. Now, more literature is discovering that working towards sustainability is vital to building a stronger community and local economy because such efforts involve citizens, create jobs, and have the potential to revitalize a city. Kent Portney in “Civic Engagement and Sustainable Cities in the United States” writes specifically on why civic engagement is necessary for the sustainable movement, and begins by explaining the brief history of the United States’ job market. For much of the last decade, manufacturing jobs were the backbone of many industrial cities. These jobs called for economic growth that was threatened by environmental efforts. Local politicians now feel free to implement sustainability programs with the decrease in manufacturing jobs. (579). The evidence is found in the fact that many major cities have taken on initiatives to become more sustainable. Richard Florida, in the book Cities and the Creative Class, further addresses this issue by stating that now “in the creative economy, the situation has reversed itself” because economic growth and environmental efforts can be achieved together (58). Furthermore, he mentions how “forward-looking regions also see the environment as a source of economic competitiveness, quality-of-life, and talent attraction” (58). Essentially, companies and young professionals want an area that is environmentally sound, which has propelled many post-industrial cities to “go

green.” As Richard Florida has pointed out, having a great quality of place that has amenities like community gardens and thriving local shops and restaurants will attract more talent than jobs will (86).

Florida’s discusses a brief overview of Chattanooga, Tennessee, a city that was once known for high-polluting industries. After revitalizing its downtown, it was able to attract 1.5 million people in its first year open. Their process for achieving sustainability “has focused on eliminating pollution and transforming once contaminated sites into centers of outdoor recreation and natural amenities—an inclusive public process that has involved thousands of residents and businesses” (Florida, 59-60). Florida points to the importance of transforming old, degraded space into useable attractions for the residents, future residents and tourists.

At the heart of Chattanooga’s sustainability efforts are the thousands of residents and businesses that devised and implemented effective plans under the tutelage of the local government. An important factor to understand is that there was a shift in the environmental movement; instead of a dependence on national governments, environmentalists turned to local communities as the foundation to bring about environmental change. Unfortunately, financial capital and staff restraints stifle local governments, and in order to offer opportunities to achieve sustainability, local governments need strategic partnerships with its residents and businesses. Civic engagement is necessary to address the change needed in individual communities.

From Chattanooga, we learn that local government can serve as the catalyst that brings all citizens together to modify and improve a community. Florida, though not specifically focusing

on the connection between local governments and civic engagement, but focusing on the importance of collaboration, mentions that in order to “gain a competitive advantage, regions need to create mechanisms for harnessing the knowledge and ideas of all citizens at the neighborhood, local, and regional level for improving their quality of place” (86). Local governments can be instrumental in harnessing the knowledge of residents and businesses by providing, supporting, and advertizing relevant programs and campaigns aimed at achieving sustainability.

To further prove how vital civic engagement is in achieving sustainability, Kent Portney explains that citizens must be involved in the sustainability effort because they decide on “a durable and operational definition of sustainability” (583). Sustainability evidently means practices that do not deplete resources, but one has to choose a path to meet this goal. In other words, local residents choose which city-run programs they want to become involved in, and therefore set the agenda and goals for becoming a “sustainable city.” Second, others believe that “civic engagement is itself an integral part of what it means for a city to be more sustainable and that cities need to adopt policies that will promote civic participation” (Portney, 583).

Considering this idea, we realize that sustainability is a flexible definition, and that local residents of any community are not only needed to define, but to promote and engage to create a better biophysical environment.

Portney than describes how participation in sustainability initiatives will actually change the participant—they will realize their own role in affecting the environment and will become a

more conscientious consumer. It is apparent that developing a sustainable community is not wholly about protecting the environment and curbing economic growth that may be harmful, but is also about developing a relationship between the environment and those that live on it (Portney, 583).

Portney argues that many people who want to see sustainability do not necessarily see the link with civic engagement. A commonly held belief is that if a city has an air pollution problem, then the professionals need to fix this one specific problem. Many do not understand the significance of changing around values that promote communitarian efforts in order to fix problems (Portney, 584). This way of thinking can prove detrimental because many environmental issues often manifest themselves in one particular visible issue for a city, but curing that one issue will not cure the problem. The issue resides in people's habits, and local governments can only aim to involve them to shed negative behavior. Portney addresses the three deadly sins of society that contribute to pollution and a lack of concern for the environment: "tragedy of the commons, the not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) syndrome, and the expansion of cities' ecological footprints that results from the transboundary shifting of environmental impacts (585)." In other words, this "rampant individualism" means that citizens act with regard to themselves, and not to the community. Straying from the view of traditional economics, we learn that what is sufficient for the community is not what is always beneficial for the individual (Portney, 585). Thus, in order to have a sustainable city, citizens must understand their role in a community and appreciate the effects of their actions.

Portney realizes that environmental efforts must then include community building efforts as well. In a study of 41 big cities, at least 34 have some form of participatory processes associated with their sustainability programs (Portney, 586). Furthermore, he points to the fact that communitarian elements of the environmental movement lead to community building as well, which means “efforts aimed at promoting greater interpersonal interaction, greater participation in civic organizations, and, in short, fostering civil society” (Portney, 587). Essentially, he links the importance of sustainability to community building projects as means of creating citizens that care.

However, Portney’s study also leaves many questions unanswered. Though, we do learn that it is necessary for local governments to engage its citizens in order to fix the issues of understaffing and fiscal issues to achieve sustainability, we are left with the question of how? And, what programs would require citizens help?

David Hess and Langdon Winner in “Enhancing Justice and Sustainability at the Local Level: Affordable Policies for Urban Governments,” outlines programs that involve local citizens. Using the categories of food programs, specifically community garden initiatives, energy consumption, and the development of local businesses, Hess and Winner’s analysis of thirty case studies discuss how urban governments could work for sustainability without fiscal constraints and summarize the benefits of these programs for community building.

Firstly, the article considers how to promote community gardening and urban agriculture. There first and most aggressive point is that community gardening should not only be about food

provisioning, but must also encourage education, healthy eating practices, and alternative recreational activities. Aesthetically, community gardens can fill abandoned and unattractive plots of land, though they can be placed in local parks and schools as well (Hess and Winner, 4-6). “Community Gardening and Community Development: Individual, Social, and Community Benefits of a Community Conservation Program” by Mary L. Ohmer, Pamela Meadowcroft, Kate Freed, and Erika Lewis mentions how these gardens facilitate interactions among residents, and points to many case studies where neighborhood ties are stronger when living adjacent to a community garden (380-381). Drawing on Florida’s argument, it is these social interactions and networking that will attract and retain people to an area. On a personal level, volunteerism “fosters ‘interpersonal trust, toleration, empathy for others, and respect for the common good’” (Ohmer, et al., 382). Community gardens not only achieve sustainability, but also help cultivate the individual and community mentalities that are necessary for a thriving and sustainable city that is comparable to Portney’s thesis. Here, local governments start by mandating the land to be used and setting a plan into action, but an effective plan requires the involvement of the local residents.

Local governments can also partner with small businesses, residents or non-profits to achieve a more sustainable amount of energy consumption. If a city has the privilege to control their electric utilities (unfortunately, Binghamton does not), there is potential to reduce greenhouse gases while stimulating local businesses. By providing incentives for small businesses to invest in renewable energy, and even to aid in developing a small business that focuses in

renewable energy installers, local governments can see to sustainability (Hess and Winner, 10). If a public sector cannot provide the mentioned resources, Hess and Winner suggest initiating Community Choice Aggregation. San Francisco, for example, failed to take hold of public power, but instead pursued Community Choice Aggregation. The city could potentially aggregate its electricity customers in order to secure a new contract with stipulations that include energy conservation. Local businesses and residents can reap the infrastructural benefits (Hess and Winner, 11). Another area cities can focus on to advocate using less energy is using buses that use natural gas. In Chattanooga, for example, buses run on hydropower, which reduces the dissemination of greenhouse gases. If the city cannot achieve this on their own, it is prudent to group with local non-profits interested in achieving sustainability as well in order to gather the funds and support necessary to shift the energy used by buses (Hess and Winner, 12). From Hess and Winner's case studies, it is apparent that there are specific targets that local governments can address, such as bussing, small businesses, and utility companies to achieve less energy consumption. Collaboration with local governments between the profit and non-profit sector and residents is necessary to achieve these goals.

Thirdly, local city governments can facilitate the development of small businesses. Schaper in "The Essence of Ecopreneurship," outlines why it is necessary for small businesses to adopt environmentally friendly practices by stating that, "The adoption of environmentally responsible business practices can, conceivably, open up additional range of opportunities for entrepreneurs. These include, among other things, the development of new products and services,

improvements to the efficiency of existing firms, new methods of marketing and the reconfiguration of existing business models and practices” (27). Schaper sees the potential that “ecopreneurship” provides, but, as I argue, it is the role of the local government to facilitate these small businesses in achieving such goals. City governments can help encourage this by “support[ing] buy-local campaigns, develop[ing] green procurement standards for purchasing, and put[ing] into effect green building codes” (Hess and Winner, 18). Hess and Winner also see the importance of encouraging businesses to partner with local businesses organizations, such as the American Independent Business Alliance (AMBIA), which aims at helping local businesses against franchises. In Austin, the local government participated in the local AMBIA chapter and “developed the IBIZ (Independent Business Development Zones) program, which provides advertising, logos in doors, streetlight signs, brochures, maps, and special event days to connect shoppers with locally owned businesses” (Hess and Winner, 17). This initiative is necessary for sustainability and a thriving economy because local businesses generate more money to the economy due to the fact that they create a greater multiplier effect (Hess and Winner, 19). Fundamentally, the local government can see positive economic development by encouraging their local businesses to adopt environmentally friendly practices.

### **Best Practices**

It is evident that sustainable cities require civic engagement to achieve its mission. Participation in the community is a means of connecting local members, while simultaneously acting as a technique for achieving a city that is healthier and greener. The City of Binghamton

promotes such practices that aim at informing citizens how to become involved in their local green movement, while advertising the benefits to them and their community.

“Sustainable practices are vital to ensuring Binghamton’s environmental, economic, and social health,” said Mayor Ryan, “This new policy complements the City’s existing conservation measures, and lays the groundwork for additional practices that will shrink our carbon footprint, reduce costs, and build a stronger community” (City of Binghamton, 5/23/08). Mayor Ryan of Binghamton understands that sustainability has a two-fold mission of bettering our planet and also building a stronger community. An alert/brief written in May 25th, 2008 highlights the City’s initiatives in galvanizing the members of government to the cause of sustainability in order to save money, thus giving the government room to fix other problems. The City created guidelines for City employees that includes reducing the energy used by electronics, encouraging the recycling of common office supplies and the proper disposal of batteries, and urging the staff to avoid using fossil fuels. The City was able to show that turning off computers at night could save up to \$2,800. The City also assigned meaning to these practices by explaining the positive effects these practices will have.

Binghamton wants to be among cities that are sustainable, and as result has hired a Sustainable Development Planner, Amelia LoDolce. In an interview, I asked her how Binghamton is involved in the categories of food, energy and local businesses, and she explained how the government attempts to promote the involvement of people in such initiatives.

One method of the City of Binghamton is an effort to use the media to reach out to its

citizens and inform them of sustainable practices within the City. On June 17th, 2009, a press release announced the second installment of Binghamton's Open Government Video Series, "the City's latest initiative to connect constituents to local resources through increased transparency" (City of Binghamton, 7/16/09). This video shows the numerous civic engagement opportunities, many of which are necessary in achieving a more sustainable city such as the VINES community garden program, the Fresh Cycles Youth Program, aimed at teaching children how to fix bikes, the River Trails Commission, which fixes paths along Binghamton's rivers, and the Shade Tree Commission, which assesses which trees would grow healthily in Binghamton's soil and climate conditions.

The VINES, Volunteers Improving Neighborhood Environments, community garden initiative began in 2007 and is an example of how Binghamton realizes that localism as a form of eating contributes to a healthy environment. As mentioned before, community gardening has a plethora of positive effects for a community. Instead of shipping food from across the world, Binghamton is aiming to increase its ability to eat from its own soil. The VINES group specifically turns vacant government lots into useable plots for consumption, work done entirely by community members. The initiative is furthering its outreach by developing relationships with schools. A garden site at 128 Laurel Ave is partnering with Horace Mann Elementary School to create garden space for students. To show how Binghamton is supporting this initiative, besides providing media attention, the City is one of VINES top sponsors (<http://vb.binghamtonsustainability.org/index.html>).

Binghamton also supports the local downtown farmer's market, another great way to stimulate the downtown while providing healthy food to the economy. What is unique about this program is that it also ties into supporting local businesses. The City of Binghamton's Economic Development office supports and promotes neighborhood business associations, such as the Downtown Binghamton Business Association. One of their functions is to oversee the downtown Farmer's market. The City of Binghamton is also able to promote the necessary partnerships that work towards sustainability, involve citizens, and create amenities that foster an excellent quality of place.

Binghamton also aims to help local businesses build a more sustainable community. In April 2009, Binghamton's Mayor Matt Ryan became part of ICLEI- Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI), which calls for a targeted reduction of greenhouse gases. To achieve this initiative, Binghamton must include its local businesses in these measures by educating them on how to reduce greenhouse gases. Binghamton also has many non-profits as a valuable resource in achieving sustainability. Binghamton currently promotes (LEED), "an internationally recognized green building certification system, providing third-party verification that a building or community was designed and built using strategies aimed at improving performance across all the metrics that matter most: energy savings, water efficiency, CO2 emissions reduction, improved indoor environmental quality, and stewardship of resources and sensitivity to their impacts" (U.S Green Building Council). Binghamton is promoting these practices by advertising architecture businesses that follow LEED certification rules in the January 2010 City of

Binghamton Green Resource Guide ([Green Resource Guide](#)).

Binghamton has no control over its energy provider, NYSEG, and cannot initiate changes in energy this way. However, on June 22, 2009, a news release entitled “Binghamton Energy Efficiency Residential Loan Program Gains Assembly Approval” wrote about how Binghamton is moving closer to becoming one of the first cities to implement an energy efficiency loan program for homeowners that will eventually create more jobs, lower utility bills, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This plan was devised earlier in 2009 and was entitled, the Binghamton Energy Efficiency (Be2) Loan Program, an innovative program that will support energy-efficient retrofits of homes through loans. Binghamton is able to work around issues like not controlling NYSEG and find other ways to promote less energy consumption.

Finally, Binghamton has made efforts to promote citizens to shop downtown. On December 12th, 2008, the City of Binghamton released a press that announced the launching of the "Think Independent – Shop Local in Downtown Binghamton" holiday campaign, intended to encourage people to shop in downtown Binghamton for the holidays. This campaign gathered coupons for local business, made available on the website, operated the trolley car throughout downtown to facilitate easy accessibility to local businesses, and provided advertisements. The article quotes Binghamton Office in of Economic Development’s director Marry Harris:

“Through this initiative we’ve pooled our resources, leveraged our marketing dollars, and positioned ourselves for similar collaborations in the future,” said BEDO Director Merry Harris.

“We’ve achieved more by working together than if we had worked separately, and our office was

pleased to play a role.” (City of Binghamton, 12/12/08). Binghamton realized how crucial partnerships are in sustainability and community building efforts, and demonstrated the necessity caused by funds and staff restraints.

## **Recommendations**

Binghamton is taking enormous strides in the ways of achieving sustainability. The City is making efforts to engage its citizens in meaningful activities that also work towards community strengthening efforts. Yet, Binghamton has a valuable resource that the government could partner with further: Binghamton University.

Many of the civic initiative projects are aimed at involving local citizens, but many are not advertised to the local student population. Many students live downtown and want to feel part of the community. The government can launch specific initiatives aimed at involving students so they feel like members of the community. The City of Binghamton can also work on raising the awareness on such initiatives to students on campus. By promoting projects and events more actively, Binghamton has the potential to connect a larger amount of students to the area, which may result in greater retention rates.

During an interview with Ameila LoDolce, we spoke about retention rates in Binghamton. We realized that students we know who have stayed in Binghamton all find the green amenities to be a point of interest. If the city was able to connect more students to the already existing programs, many more could be interested in settling in Binghamton.

My recommendation is to expand the number of internships available to Binghamton

University students. Many of the programs, such as VINES, could use interns from different disciplines. An intern working on Public Relations could greatly increase the visibility of this initiative on campus. Furthermore, two student interns worked at the City of Binghamton's office to study energy rates. They were vital to this cause, and showed how necessary students are to this area. Binghamton can now find students to work on Community Choice Aggregation, an ambitious but innovative project. Binghamton should work on engaging more students to prestigious internships.

VINES can also work with volunteers and interns to increase its partnerships with local schools. As mentioned, many schools benefit from community gardens. Teachers could use this as a resource to not only feed children healthier food, but could use the garden for science classes as well. Students can be a fundamental link between older community members and school age children.

Furthermore, Binghamton has many great efforts, but the media attention that is given is poor. One idea is for the City of Binghamton to increase the visibility of programs by providing student discounts to students if they purchase food from the downtown Farmer's market. While researching this project I also found that the websites and articles are poorly organized and lacking information. Binghamton should work on its own green website, which clearly states the sustainability efforts, and then promote this to students.

## **Conclusion**

Sustainability efforts offer enormous positive benefits, such as a brighter economy, a

better quality of place, and a healthier environment. The local government is fundamental in organizing initiatives. What is key to its success is engaging its local citizens. Binghamton has taken many strides in this field, but needs to engage students so younger, fresher minds can assist in making Binghamton a wonderful city of live and work in.

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