

Minnesota Sustainable Communities Network: A Model for Outreach and Education

Cost-effective tools help communicate sustainability concepts to a diverse audience

The Minnesota Sustainable Communities Network (MnSCN) was created to promote sustainability in the state. The network, which relies heavily on electronic communication -- a biweekly e-mail newsletter and a database-driven web site -- has attracted over 2,300 members since it was started in 1997.

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Minnesota has had active and visible involvement from its state government in sustainability and sustainable development activities for a number of years. Minnesota's Declaration of State Environmental Policy, enacted in 1973, provides a strong foundation for directing state government to preserve the environment for future generations, while also recognizing their social, economic, and other requirements. In 1993, then-Governor Arne H. Carlson launched the Minnesota Sustainable Development Initiative, housed in the state's planning agency, a multi-year and multi-stakeholder effort that advanced a vision for sustainable development in Minnesota, and which published a number of policy documents.

In the last decade, sustainable development has also been promoted by a number of legislative initiatives, such as the Sustainable Forest Resources Act of 1995, the Metropolitan Livable Communities Act of 1995, and the Community Based Planning Act of 1997. More recently, Governor Jesse Ventura's administration has championed Smart Growth; it has adopted a set of Smart Growth Principles that are intended to provide the basis for criteria used to screen requests for state bonding money.

Concurrent with these and other policy and legislative initiatives, a variety of Minnesota state agencies have become actively involved in fostering the implementation of sustainability activities at the community level. One of these agencies, the Minnesota Office of Environmental Assistance (OEA), has included among its four environmental outcomes the goal that Minnesota communities are sustainable.

Background: The OEA

The OEA is a non-regulatory state environmental agency whose mission is to protect Minnesota's environment and assure a sustainable economy through waste prevention and resource conservation. Major program emphases of the office include solid waste management, toxic pollution prevention, environmental education, and promoting sustainable communities.

The evolution of the OEA toward adopting a program focus in sustainable communities was an organic one, flowing out of the development of the office's active pollution prevention program. Like many other such programs, OEA's initial focus was on toxic

pollution prevention by businesses. It became clear, however, that the development of the program included several directions as natural next steps:

- A move toward a broadened focus on reduction, prevention, and resource conservation in other environmental media such as solid waste, energy, and water.
- An increased recognition of the importance of the role played by non-business partners such as local governments, and community and nonprofit organizations, in achieving pollution prevention.
- A realization that pollution prevention is only one part of a broader movement toward societal change and development as reflected in the growing, worldwide sustainability movement.

As a consequence of its development as an outgrowth of a pollution prevention program, the OEA's sustainable communities work has continued to rely strongly on preventive, partnership-based, proactive approaches.

The Sustainable Communities Team

The OEA's Sustainable Communities (SC) team was formed in 1996, partly as a result of an extensive agency-wide strategic planning process. There was strong grassroots support from staff for the idea of this new team, whose goal was to promote sustainability activities at the community level. Staff was recruited for the SC team primarily from those working in the area of toxic pollution prevention, but also from other topic areas.

The team initially was composed of seven part- and full-time individuals (the equivalent of approximately 4.6 full-time employees), each of whom was eager to participate in the team's activities. Although the OEA's focus on sustainability remains, some of its resources and staff have been reallocated. The current SC team consisting of two full- and part-time individuals (equivalent to approximately 1.8 full-time employees) continues to work to strengthen sustainability efforts at the community level in Minnesota, and is aided by one other staff in the OEA working on industrial ecology.

The SC team focuses on the following services:

- Providing financial assistance (grants) and technical assistance to strengthen community capacity to implement sustainability activities.
- Developing and disseminating information on innovative sustainability examples, ideas, and resources.
- Holding conferences and meetings about sustainability.
- Facilitating multi-stakeholder collaboration and partnerships related to sustainability.

- Advancing sustainability on a state and local policy level.

History and Overview of MnSCN

The major vehicle of the SC team's activities has become the Minnesota Sustainable Communities Network (MnSCN). The MnSCN was created by the OEA's SC team in January 1997 with the goal of encouraging networking, information exchange, and better access to assistance on the topic of sustainability. It reflected the SC team's need for a concrete program and mechanism to focus energy and attention on sustainability, and provided an effective tool to reach those who might be interested in information, education, and assistance on this topic. As discussed below, MnSCN's major activities consist of regular e-mail updates, conferences and meetings, and distribution of printed materials.

Initially, the SC team considered creating a voluntary participation program (like EPA's 33/50 program) in which communities would make voluntary commitments to sustainability-related activities that would in turn be recognized by the state. Local governments would have had a strong role in this original vision, and communities would have been required to pass resolutions and undertake reporting and other requirements to participate.

Initial discussions with local government staff indicated, however, that this would not be a successful path because most local governments and their leaders are spread so thin already. Philosophically, it was also rejected as more "top-down" than the grassroots approach that was later adopted.

MnSCN Core Beliefs

Some of the core philosophical beliefs that helped shape MnSCN's development are discussed below.

Everyone can be a potential change agent.

MnSCN was designed to encourage people, wherever they live in the state, and whatever their job or affiliation, to take action to build a more sustainable community in which to live. Our experience was that, in a specific community, it is impossible to predict who will be the most powerful change agent. This role can be played by developers, architects, local government officials, business owners, and non-profit leaders. We also have recognized that leaders are often individuals, not organizations. Although organizations can have an important role, typically bold change is led by individuals.

Change agents experience a change of mind, not necessarily a change or increase of technical skills.

It is more important to open peoples' eyes to possibilities and to create and support change agents than to provide information at a superficial level, as often occurs with fact

sheets, manuals, and brochures. The MnSCN e-mail updates are designed to offer inspiration as well as information on a regular, reinforcing basis. We have tried to help people "think outside the box," even to the point of taking risks and including ideas that may challenge people. We encourage people to think in terms of systems, and in terms of interrelationships among the environment, economy, and society. The MnSCN works to help people become motivators and coordinators of others.

Minnesotans need to learn from Minnesota examples, implemented by Minnesotans.

The Internet can overwhelm people with all the good things they could be doing. But if we want to convince someone to do something, examples from close to home are much more persuasive. MnSCN's efforts have worked to show that sustainability is concrete and is being done by a person who is a local phone call away.

It is important to stay in touch with your audience.

MnSCN e-mail newsletters have a touch of "back fence" discussions, and the editor is accessible and inviting of member input — which is provided frequently. Members often write in or call, suggesting resources, case studies, and jobs. Similar themes are reinforced in many issues of the newsletter. Biweekly MnSCN e-mails take a page from Madison Avenue advertising tactics: Hit 'em up over and over again until they buy.

Additional support for this people-centered approach to building sustainable communities came from research paid for by the OEA and conducted by the public relations/public affairs firm Himle-Horner in 1996. This research specifically sought to assess public opinion about sustainable development in Minnesota and to identify opportunities for promoting sustainability in the state.

One key recommendation of this research (which utilized a telephone survey, focus groups, and public forums) was to "create and leverage early adopters." Specific thoughts expressed under this recommendation were:

Sustainable development is most credible as a community initiative. This grassroots approach should be reinforced with promulgation of success stories. Build a grassroots network of stakeholders. Build coalitions around specific projects. Build a coalition around individuals not organizations. Stakeholder organizations in Minnesota don't have broad credibility; individuals do. Educate. There is interest as indicated by the forums. Leverage the interest.

Program Implementation and Membership

The MnSCN program was designed over several months in late 1996, and a three-fold printed brochure was developed describing the new program. The brochure, along with a cover letter, was mailed in January 1997 to approximately 6,000 individuals who had expressed some degree of interest in sustainability. These individuals were selected from among people who had attended conferences on sustainability or pollution prevention;

belonged to organizations working for sustainability; had participated in activities of the Minnesota Sustainable Development Initiative; or were otherwise likely prospects for membership. Hundreds of individuals immediately joined the network, which had a membership of over 900 by February 1997.

As of December 2002 membership is over 2300, with a fairly even mix of individuals from non-profit organizations, businesses, local governments, state government, students and educational institutions, and those without organizational affiliation. The vast majority of members reside in Minnesota.

When members first join the MnSCN, they are asked which topics are of particular interest to them. Below are rankings of some topics of interest of the first MnSCN members (each is followed by the number of times it was circled by MnSCN members):

Land Use/Urban Planning	286
Natural Resources	192
Public Policy	165
Economic Development	159
Pollution Prevention	149
Education	142
Agriculture	137
Water Quality	129
Energy	100
Waste Management	92
Civic Involvement	91
Transportation	87
Housing	82
Measurement/Indicators	82
Business	81
Deep Ecology	64
Forestry	57
Other	55
Wastewater Treatment	32
Telecommunications	28

Major Components of MnSCN

E-mail Newsletter

From the beginning, there was an emphasis on electronic communications for the MnSCN. The MnSCN e-mail newsletter has evolved into the core activity of the network. (To subscribe, please send an e-mail request to nextstep@moea.state.mn.us). Members were encouraged to provide the OEA with their e-mail addresses, and these were added to a listserv (e-mail list) created through a local Internet provider for a modest cost of approximately \$30 per month.

The listserv is easy to administer, and members can be added or deleted through a simple web-based interface. MnSCN is a moderated listserv, meaning that OEA must approve any communications to the list. The only communications actually sent out to the list are the e-mail updates sent by the OEA every other week.

This electronic publication typically contains most of the following sections: free offers to MnSCN members, tools and resources, news from members, jobs available, events, and sources of funding. The newsletter is edited by Philipp Muessig, with assistance from Paul Moss of the SC team.

Maintaining the newsletter (which has now published over 150 issues) has taken a lot of consistent work, but there always seems to be new and timely information worth including. Typically, a number of suggestions are received for each issue regarding events, new publications, jobs, or other postings to be included in the newsletter.

The newsletter has been a very effective way of disseminating free materials; a typical issue generates 75 to 100 requests for guides, videos, manuals, or other resources. The newsletter also has helped advertise OEA's and the SC team's services, and has led to increased demand for assistance.

Meetings and Conferences

Several meetings and conferences have been held for MnSCN members and others interested in sustainability, drawing strong attendance. These events built on previous conferences sponsored by the OEA, including Environmental Solutions for Minnesota Communities (which attracted over 300 registrants in 1995), the Minnesota Conference on Sustainable Development (with over 750 registrants in 1996), and the 1996 Northland Conference on Developing Sustainable Communities (with over 200 registrants).

Six MnSCN regional meetings were held throughout the state in 1997, attracting a total of 333 registrants. In 1998, an additional six MnSCN regional meetings were held, with 296 registrants. The OEA sponsored a major statewide conference, "Taking the Next Step Toward a Sustainable Future," at the MnSCN annual meeting in April 1999, with over 560 registrants. The MnSCN annual meeting in 2000 - "Tools for Building Sustainable Communities" - drew 350 people and included afternoon sessions planned entirely by MnSCN members. The 2001 meeting - "Celebrating Successes" - was held in conjunction with presentation of the Governor's Awards for Excellence in Waste and Pollution Prevention, and drew 600 people. The 2002 meeting - "Be the Change You Wish to See in the World" - was again held in conjunction with presentation of the Governor's Awards for Excellence in Waste and Pollution Prevention, and drew 425 people.

These meetings and conferences have helped to publicize the MnSCN, have brought in new members and partners, and also have provided a valuable opportunity for networking, education, and information exchange between individuals interested in

sustainability. However, they have stretched the staff thin and required a great deal of time, effort, and energy to plan and execute.

Publications

Other MnSCN products have included several publications:

- A printed member directory.
- An annual digest of examples, ideas, and resources on sustainability.
- A general MnSCN brochure.
- General fact sheets on sustainability.
- An order form for free publications.

The digest has been well received but has been discontinued due to increasing use of the MnSCN web site. By contrast, the printed member directory did not prove to be of great use and has been discontinued. An online member directory is a component of the NextStep web site described below. The fact sheets have also not been particularly effective in generating excitement or requests for assistance.

Intern Program

One less successful MnSCN activity was the intern-matching program, which was set up to help match organizations offering sustainability-related internships with individuals interested in participating in such internships. Although over 20 organizations listed internships with MnSCN, and a number of individuals did contact OEA staff for assistance in being placed in these internships, this rather extensive effort did not result in many placements of interns and has been discontinued. Available internships are still occasionally advertised in the MnSCN e-mail update.

Current Directions

NextStep Web Site

Given the current level of staff available to the SC team, we believe that a strong focus on electronic communications is critical for maintaining the team's effectiveness. Along with continuing to publish regular bi-weekly e-mail updates, the team launched in 1999 a major effort to create a new web site called NextStep, located at <http://www.nextstep.state.mn.us>.

This interactive, database-driven web-based assistance tool, unveiled in late 2000, seeks to provide a convenient point of access to information about sustainability in Minnesota, and provides a source of information for MnSCN members. The site allows for

decentralized “information entry” to its contents by all registered users. While the NextStep site is open to all interested persons for searching and utilization of most of the site resources, registered users are also able to add links, resources, and calendar events to the site, as well as participating in discussion forums and searches of the member directory. Currently there are over 800 short (one-page) word-searchable resource articles. Every two weeks 3 new resource articles are highlighted on the front page of NextStep, along with 3 new featured events and one “Worth Noting” item.

NextStep is divided into 12 major categories (such as agriculture, buildings, business, energy, land use, and water) which relate to sustainability. The site seeks to address the economic, social, and environmental aspects of each topic area. Each category is searchable separately and contains sections on top tools and resources, case studies, and short articles. Interactive scrolling conversations were tried during 2001 but discontinued due to limited promotion and low usage.

Each topic is managed by a volunteer topic guide with a strong understanding of the topic area. Guides have been identified who represent a variety of governmental agencies, nonprofit organizations, educational institutions, and businesses. Content is added to the site by these volunteer guides, as well as by general site users and by OEA staff. Topic guides and OEA staff oversee site content and activity and select the best resources to be featured on the topic pages.

Video

Another project recently completed is a short video about sustainable communities in Minnesota that was made available to MnSCN members and others with an interest in sustainability. This video highlights five Minnesota communities that have taken initial steps toward sustainability. With a background of music and images, this video seeks to illustrate the concept of sustainability and inspire others to take initial steps in their communities.

Grants

The OEA also is continuing to provide grants of up to \$75,000 for community sustainability efforts, particularly those rooted in pollution prevention, resource conservation, and environmental education. These grants have proven to be very effective in serving as seed money for local efforts, and have also resulted in inspiring case studies, the results of which have been disseminated through the MnSCN newsletter and through conferences. The grants have also helped OEA staff learn more about practices that are proving to be effective in communities, and suggest information that could be useful to disseminate to MnSCN members.

Challenges Encountered

There have been a number of challenges in the development of the MnSCN. One has been to better integrate the MnSCN into the broader work of the OEA. Staff working on

the MnSCN have clearly seen that its services are popular and well accepted by members, and most OEA staff are members of MnSCN. Nonetheless, there seems to be a disconnect between MnSCN's success and its overall integration into the OEA's activities.

One of the strengths of the MnSCN is that it is an individual-based network, rather than an organizational based one. But this can translate into a weakness if there is no clear role for organizations to participate and strengthen the network, and when members relate to the network solely as individuals.

Staffing, while small, has proven adequate for the administration of most MnSCN activities. Although a number of staff members have played critical roles in specific MnSCN activities (particularly conference and workshop planning), MnSCN has remained essentially dependent upon its two core staff (the authors of this article), who were the MnSCN's founders.

The core staff has maintained their belief in and enthusiasm for the MnSCN as an effective and inspiring outreach tool and continue to enjoy working on network-related efforts. These staff work closely as a team and are able to provide each other with moral support to continue with this activity. Especially when maintaining an effort over several years, it is important that staff retain a high level of personal motivation for the project.

Another MnSCN challenge relates to the shifting use of terminology and changes in organizational focus — issues that are typical with most institutions. Whereas "sustainable development" was championed by Governor Carlson during the 1990s, the current Governor Ventura speaks more of "smart growth" and "healthy vital communities." Within the OEA, MnSCN staff have utilized the terms "sustainability" and "sustainable communities" in the context of "pollution prevention" and "resource conservation," which are the OEA's organizational focus.

For programmatic consistency, it is important to maintain the same focus and language for project efforts. However, this can be challenging in the often-changing governmental environment, with its periodic shifts in leadership, values, and language.

MnSCN's Effectiveness

Three e-mail surveys have been conducted to measure the effectiveness of MnSCN's activities, and the response has been very positive. Over 460 MnSCN members responded to a February 2002 survey - a 22% response rate. Questions from that survey and compiled answers follow.

1. How valuable are MnSCN e-mail updates in providing information to you?

- a) Very valuable - 59%
- b) Somewhat valuable - 39%
- c) Not very valuable - 2%

2. As a result of reading the MnSCN e-mail updates, have you taken any of the following actions?

- a) Attended an event? - 61%
- b) Ordered a publication? - 58%
- c) Looked at a web site? - 93%
- d) Contacted an organization? - 60%
- e) Forwarded information to others? 88%
- f) Changed your actions? - 24%

3. Have you ever visited the NextStep web site?

Yes - 60%

No - 40%

4. How do you like the NextStep web site overall?

- a) Like a lot - 49%
- b) Like somewhat - 40%
- c) Don't like - 0%

5. Please mark an "X" next to your favorite features of NextStep (the ones that you like the most):

- a) Resource listings - 74%
- b) Topic Guide pages - 42%
- c) Case studies - 37%
- d) Job listings - 33%
- e) Archive of updates - 12%
- f) Searching capabilities - 30%
- g) Calendar listings - 40%
- h) Scrolling conversations - 2%
- i) Member directory - 14%
- j) Posting listings on the site - 12%
- k) "Tell-a-Friend" - 7%

6. Do you tend to find the sustainability-related information that you search for on the site?

- a) Usually - 48%
- b) Sometimes - 32%
- c) Rarely - 2%

In addition, members responded with several dozen pages of overwhelming positive comments and suggestions, such as the following:

“I have found the network to be an extremely useful source of information. I am organizing a get-together of friends interested in sustainability to determine if they think it is possible to have a successful workshop on sustainability, open to the entire community. I will be using the planning booklet I just received from OEA as a resource. Thanks so much. I am amazed at how much is currently going on concerning sustainability (which I find out about by reading MnSCN updates) and hope I can incite my friends to help me be more active!”

“I love the network — it's broader than my particular area of expertise, so it helps me expand the way I look at my job. Keep up the great work — I think it's a wonderful and valuable resource.”

Conclusions and Lessons Learned

Overall, it is possible to offer the following lessons learned from the past six years of working on the MnSCN:

The creation of a network — linked together with a regular e-mail newsletter, a web site, periodic meetings, and occasional publications — can be an effective, relatively low cost, and fun way of spreading information on an emerging topic to a varied audience.

E-mail newsletters can be a particularly powerful tool in that they offer regular personal contact and are paperless, immediate, inexpensive, easy to administer, independent, and flexible. E-mail newsletters should consider integrating other features besides information (such as free offers, job listings, letters from members, local events, and sources of funding) to make them more interesting for their readers. A disadvantage of e-mail newsletters is that they are better suited for providing briefer articles with less in-depth information. They also tend to lack the attractive formatting and readability typical of printed documents to ensure those with low-end computers and Internet access can read the newsletters, and can be subject to occasional technological glitches and complications.

Focusing on the interested individual and on "early adopters" is a promising strategy for promoting new ideas and approaches. Advantages of this approach include: an appreciative and receptive audience; willingness of those receiving information to transmit it to others; promotion of a feeling of belonging that offers a greater sense of legitimacy for those who may be on the cutting edge and who may feel isolated in their communities or workplaces; and helping to create a sense of excitement regarding the topic being promoted.

Focusing network efforts on individuals instead of organizations has many advantages, but also some disadvantages. Advantages include avoiding the need to deal with organizational politics, ability to reach large numbers of participants, having a lower profile for ideas or concepts that may be controversial, and being able to help new ideas move through a wide range of organizations. Disadvantages include lack of institutional

involvement or sense of ownership in the programs, possible institutional inertia or opposition to new ideas, and lack of a high profile (which sometimes may be desirable).

The electronic nature of many of the communications in MnSCN is both a strength and a weakness. It clearly allows MnSCN to be implemented with relatively few resources and still have a very broad reach. However, there is a sacrifice of depth which could be provided better with more personal meetings, gatherings, and presentations, all of which can be very resource intensive.

Moving away from printed materials has been effective, since these can easily become outdated, are often expensive, need to rely on graphic design support, and can require long timelines to produce. It has been useful, however, to have a limited number of printed pieces to complement electronic communications for those individuals who may not have easy access to the Internet or who may prefer to use printed documents. Also, printed documents help promote the program and provide information to individuals in settings where access to electronic media may not exist (such as at conferences, meetings, and presentations).

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For more information on sustainable development efforts and environmental plans in Minnesota, see the Statewide/Global topic page on the MnSCN's web site at <http://www.nextstep.state.mn.us>

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