

Advance Regional Cleaner, Greener Communities Sustainability Plan

Overview

Sustainability was deeply embedded in the North Country Regional Economic Development Plan in 2011. The region's abundant natural capital was recognized in the NCREDC Plan as one of the key underpinnings of our economy. And the Plan's Vision goals align with sustainability principles.

The Cleaner Greener Communities planning grant was awarded priority project status in 2011 and has been developed in close collaboration with the NCREDC over the past year. It was formally adopted by the NCREDC in February 2013, the first REDC in the State to adopt its region's Sustainability Plan. A number of NCREDC members served on the 7-county leadership Consortium for the CGC planning process, and the planning team ensured that the Sustainability Plan both supported and further developed strategies within the REDC plan.

The Consortium worked together to involve well over 250 people in 6 working groups and to ensure public input at key milestones along the development of the Plan. The Plan was developed with an overarching goal of establishing a roadmap to a sustainable future for the region. Secondly, it was developed to provide the framework for securing funding for the implementation phase of the CGC program. The Plan also recognized the significant work that is already being done across the region to achieve a more sustainable future.

To further emphasize the interdependence of the region's economy, its working landscapes, its water and energy resources, and its communities, the Sustainability Plan was titled "Our Economy."

It is worth noting that the North Country Sustainability Plan has recently won an Excellence in Planning award for "Innovation in Sustaining Places" - through the Upstate New York Chapter of the American Planning Association.

The Plan

Vision & goals

The North Country will foster a robust economy that enhances the quality of our rural communities and sustainably manage our natural resources, becoming a clean energy leader and creating opportunities for present and future generations. The Plan commits to the following goals:

- Create the greenest and most self-reliant energy economy in New York State.
- Concentrate investment in vibrant and resilient downtowns.
- Grow an innovative local economy and attract the next generation of entrepreneurs, on the foundation of our well managed natural resources and exceptional quality of life.
- Cultivate economic opportunities based on sound environmental practices for farming, forestry, and recreation.
- Develop lower carbon solutions to our rural transportation challenges.
- Safeguard our abundant water resources.
- Transition from linear waste streams to innovative reuse of materials.

- Foster an informed and invested citizenry.
- Contribute to the state’s goal to reduce GHG emissions.
- Foster collaboration between regional entities and governments to improve planning, share knowledge, and implement best practices.
- Create capabilities to adapt to climate change through proactive planning and infrastructure upgrades.

Five overlapping themes were identified in the development of the Plan that cross through each of the six focus area chapters. These five themes are:

- economic development
- education
- greenhouse gas (GHG) emission reduction
- governance
- climate adaptation

Economic development was originally designated as a focus area chapter, but was later integrated as a common theme due to its connection to all aspects of the Plan.

Six technical focus area chapters were developed for which to establish sustainability goals and strategies throughout the region. To ensure that this planning process moves from theory to action, working group members developed goals and targets that were measurable through a series of indicators. To achieve these targets, each working group focus area chapter identified a series of specific implementation strategies that were associated directly with focus area goals.

1. Clean energy: Create the greenest and most self-reliant energy economy in New York State.

Goals:

1. Increase the local generation and distribution of renewable energy
2. Increase energy efficiency of the region’s building stock
3. Reduce energy use through consumer decision-making and behavioral changes

Priority Strategies:

- Perform a resource and lifecycle assessment to evaluate the quality and quantity of the North Country’s biomass resources and determine the capacity for regional biomass expansion and adoption.
- Provide and increase training opportunities for local contractors for renewable energy installations.
- Facilitate an increase in solar installation using successful models of residential and community-based solar power, including solar thermal.
- Promote the use of NYSERDA’s ongoing programs to enhance the rate and scale of energy retrofits.
- Establish incentives for energy efficiency and green building projects.
- Develop guidance for small-scale power economics.

2. Livable Communities & Land Use: Concentrate investment in vibrant and resilient downtowns.

Goals:

1. Revitalize Main Streets and town centers to reduce the cost and impacts of sprawl development.

2. Create and update comprehensive plans and zoning ordinances as a means to improve sustainable practices.
3. Improve the resiliency and adaptability of communities to climate-related impacts.
4. Include public health in land use planning and sustainability initiatives to encourage healthy communities.
5. Develop sustainability programs in local schools and colleges; develop, instill, and demonstrate concepts of sustainable land use practices.

Priority Strategies:

- Implement pilot projects for Main Street redevelopment. Use successful outcomes as the basis for future projects.
- Provide funding and staffing resources to support the development of local planning, including Hazard Mitigation Plans and Comprehensive Land Use
- Establish programs that provide infrastructure and economic resiliency to climate related impacts.
- Encourage healthy communities through nutrition awareness and providing healthy local food choices.
- Promote educational opportunities and develop knowledge networking to connect schools and enable them to share sustainability projects and programs across the region.

3. Working Landscapes: Cultivate economic opportunities based on sound environmental practices for farming, forestry, and recreation.

Goals:

1. Support the development of the agricultural and forestry industries
2. Increase local food and forest product processing and sales within the region
3. Increase the use of sustainably harvested biomass to meet the thermal energy needs of the region and beyond
4. Promote tourism and recreation based on the region's natural resources while providing for the long-term maintenance of the region's recreational resources
5. Enhance forest management through increased use of best management practices
6. Upgrade and maintain existing farming infrastructure to improve energy efficiency and reduce farm operating costs

Priority Strategies:

- Capitalize on existing forest industry infrastructure to make greater use of forestland and underutilized farmland for biomass development.
- Support research and development of dedicated energy crops for thermal applications, such as shrub willow, switchgrass, and miscanthus.
- Expand availability of local food by encouraging new farmers, while connecting local growers with local markets, including year-round and seasonal residents, schools, institutions, and tourists.
- Establish visitor information hubs with concierge-style services in tourist destinations that coordinate outdoor excursions with transportation for visitors.
- Educate forestland owners on the financial and resource benefits of using the services of professional foresters to manage and develop their resource.
- Improve the production capacity of commodity and specialty crops and assist farms with diversification (including agri-tourism) and new business startups.
- Incentivize energy audits, upgrades of farm equipment, and methods to enable farmers to achieve production goals using less energy.

4. Transportation : Develop lower carbon solutions to our rural transportation challenges.

Goals:

1. Expand and promote the use of region wide alternatives to single-occupant vehicle travel for residents and tourists.
2. Reduce trip lengths and improve transportation and fuel efficiencies.
3. Preserve and improve aging transportation infrastructure.
4. Concentrate freight and manufacturing development and shipping at prioritized intermodal sites to support sustainable business development.

Priority Strategies:

- Update transportation codes to encourage intra-county bus services. Investigate new ways of increasing transportation or commerce options in North Country.
- Expand and complete broadband installations within the region and identify and adopt strategies to reduce transportation demand and improve commerce.
- Expand existing public transit services and establish new inter- and intra-county bus routes. Provide better connections from regional passenger rail stations and airports to hamlets and cities.
- Develop publically available informational services and educational opportunities including a regional transportation website that links residents and visitors to transportation options and services.
- Improve regional coordination of transportation infrastructure and services for residents, visitors and commercial interests.
- Improve freight operations and include freight shipping and distribution strategies in county comprehensive plans and local industrial development plans as they are updated.

5. Water Management: Safeguard our abundant water resources.

Goals:

1. Maintain adequate water supply for future needs
2. Promote watershed management planning on a regional or watershed scale
3. Maintain and/or improve the quality of the region's water bodies and supply sources
4. Reduce the energy used for water supply, distribution, and treatment

Priority Strategies:

- Implement programs to reduce system losses and conserve water supply
- Support energy-efficient upgrades and encourage the use of renewable energy sources for water infrastructure
- Support the development of watershed management plans
- Reduce pollutant loads and non-point source impacts to water quality
- Reduce the impacts of invasive species.
- Evaluate locations where engineering solutions may be needed to mitigate frequent flooding.
- Identify water management strategies needed to support the growth of businesses, industry, and recreation within the region.

6. Materials Management: Transition from linear waste streams to innovative reuse of materials.

Goals:

1. Reduce the amount of solid waste generated
2. Increase the percentage of materials recycled or reused

Priority Strategies:

- Conduct regional research on material management contracting and disposal fees to help determine best practices that can be shared regionally to improve local decision-making for material management.
- Encourage counties and planning units to adopt single- stream or zero-sort recycling.
- Increase the number of composting and digester facilities to reduce the volume of food and yard waste sent to landfills, and to create a useable product (fertilizers).
- Explore and promote market opportunities for recyclable and recovered materials.

Implementation Strategies

The North Country Sustainability Plan drives specific actions and strategies that support implementation of the NCREDC Plan. Many of the NCREDC projects funded in 2011 and 2012 were included in the Sustainability Plan as examples of sustainability in action. Many of the people who worked on the NCREDC, either as members of the Council itself or as key participants on Council teams, have been involved in the development of the Plan. This Plan strongly recommended that the NCREDC co-chairs establish and assign leadership to a Sustainability Working Group under the auspices of the NCREDC. They have appointed the Adirondack North Country Association (ANCA) to lead the implementation, under the auspices of the Council. ANCA was instrumental in creating the Plan, coordinated the 7-county leadership Consortium, and is working with members of the Consortium to oversee implementation of the Plan. ANCA's Executive Director sits on the Council. ANCA and the Working Group are tasked with facilitating implementation of the Sustainability Plan, coordinating with the Consortium and other organizations throughout the region that are working on relevant projects. Efforts already underway at the time of this plan, including projects funded with NCREDC resources, reflect the strength that comes from collaboration and an established set of regional goals.

The NCREDC established a scoring criteria for CGC Sustainability Projects, and encouraged 2013 CFA applicants to indicate whether their project met any of the criteria, even if they were not applying directly for CGC funds.

Implementation timeline

Year 1: Develop plan (completed)

- Set goals
- Identify projects
- Develop implementation strategy

Years 1-3: implement short-term projects

- Plan supported projects; case studies for replication, pilot studies
- Public outreach and education
- Re-measure baseline

Years 5 +: implement medium to long-term projects

- Build on successful projects and programs
- Identify gaps to fill
- Adapt to new technologies / changes in economic conditions

Year 10: evaluate and establish future goals

- Success stories
- Lessons learned
- Next steps

Examples of regional status, projects and activities to date that support the implementation of the Sustainability Plan:

Over 94% of the electricity generated in the North Country comes from renewable sources, demonstrating that we are and will continue to be suppliers of low-emissions energy to the state. The North Country will continue to be an exporter of clean electrical energy from renewable sources such as wind and hydro, and, to a small degree, biomass well into the future. Our tremendous biomass resources represent significant opportunities to reduce local GHG emissions by transitioning away from fossil fuel use for thermal needs, and can play an important role in statewide reduction goals.

With ReEnergy's Black River biomass plant coming on line in 2013 (a priority project in 2011 awarded \$30M in Industrial Revenue Bonds in 2012), countless schools and institutions across the region that have already converted to using biomass to heat their buildings, and a state-of-the-art facility in place to supply the region with biomass fuel, the region has made a significant start in meeting the energy goals outlined in the plan.

Several other projects are already in place that align with the Plan's strategies, including a North Country biomass market assessment that is being done under the auspices of New York State's new Green Bank. With strategic market stimulation and support, the North Country can become an important model, demonstrating how technological advances combined with locally and sustainably produced renewable energy resources can drive the rural economy and attract investment into the region. The goal of the project is to:

- Establish a biomass energy value chain baseline against which continued progress can be measured.
- Identify where biomass energy value chain stimulation and support can significantly contribute to market and/or product development, expansion and stabilization.
- Identify where research is needed to establish best practice, highest efficiency, and sustainable management of biomass resources.

It will be completed in the Fall of 2013.

The second annual North Country Clean Energy Conference was held in June 2013, attracting 250 leaders from across the region to share success stories and create more synergy on multiple clean energy opportunities and businesses. 15 exhibitors showcased their innovative technologies and market approaches to driving a local clean energy economy. Planning for the third Clean Energy conference is well underway.

CFA applications for CGC round 2 implementation funds included projects that address all of the Plan's goals. The North Country again demonstrated its resourcefulness in working within the State's guidelines for CGC Round two project guidelines. The \$1M limit on project budgets created a barrier due to the relatively small size and scale of many NC sustainability projects. One of the priority project submissions for CGC funds aggregated nine projects that together address each one of the Plan's goals, and individually can be developed as pilot projects or case studies for broader replication. Another priority project application focuses strictly on converting multiple buildings from fuel oil to biomass as a thermal fuel source.