
Extension Programming to Enhance Urban Well-Being

Case Study Series



Fostering Sustainability at a Community Level *Pinellas County and Tampa Bay MSA, Florida*

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This case study series is a supplement to program snapshots featured in the Extension Programming to Enhance Urban Well-Being chapter of ***Extension Education and the Social Sciences*** Maria Rosario T. de Guzman and Holly Hatton, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Cambridge University Press (2024)

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Program Overview – Fostering Sustainability at a Community Level

Fostering Sustainability at a Community Level is a program to address community engagement, sustainability awareness, green government certification in the Pinellas County and Tampa Bay MSA, Florida. The program has been underway for 10 years and serves city and county residents, city and county staff, and students (K-12, college, university).

This case study details a multi-layered process for fostering sustainability at a community level. It can be replicated in urban and rural areas and scaled and adapted to meet educational goals. Inputs include Extension faculty, program assistants, city and county staff, and student interns.

Urban Context

The Regional Specialized Agent (RSA), Urban Environmental Sustainability is a University of Florida/IFAS Extension faculty position that serves 11 counties within the Southwest Extension District. The RSA focuses primarily on the urban corridor within that region which includes the counties of Hillsborough, Pinellas, and Polk. The Tampa Bay Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) is ranked 18th amongst metropolitan areas in the United States and is home to over 3 million residents. The region is highly urbanized but still retains its agricultural heritage in many of the counties including Hillsborough and Manatee renowned for cattle, strawberries, and now hops and hemp.

The RSA also holds the title of Bushnell Endowed Faculty, a position funded in part by Pinellas County to recognize and address sustainability issues using a systems level approach in the most densely populated county in the State of Florida. With 3.347 persons per square mile, it is one of 35 coastal counties with a total of 280 square miles and 588 miles of coastline. Issues such as land use planning, sea level rise, economic development, and sustainability are prominent in this county and the Tampa Bay region at large given its coastal proximity and attractive location. Additionally, Pinellas County also has 24 local municipalities so there is a total of 25 local governments which makes it much more complicated to address and navigate multifaceted issues that oftentimes cross geographic borders.

As outlined, this 11-county region is made up of highly urban areas and rural enclaves, and there are well established flows of people, goods, capital, information, and natural resources, as well as waste and pollution. As mentioned above, the complexity of local government structure is also complicated by the plethora of urban partners – universities, colleges, regional partners – many of them are also engaged in the work of community engagement. As such, carving niches and engaging in fruitful partnerships is of paramount importance in advancing regional goals while prioritizing local projects, balancing budgets, and addressing societal issues.

It is against this backdrop that the RSA has filled a void for the past 10 years to develop, implement, and evaluate educational programs and initiatives to promote sustainability. This position is a one-of-a-kind position for Extension and has allowed Extension to showcase its ability to use research-backed information to develop an innovative response to sustainability that has brought multiple accolades to the county. With the increased prominence of sustainability practitioners, the county and region has benefitted from additional resources and Extension continues to be a major partner with local and regional partners. This has also resulted in increased recognition for the University of Florida Extension Service as it

demonstrates the breadth and depth of services that its faculty can engage with and amplify partner efforts.

Strategic Approach to Urban Engagement

The agent has utilized the “regional” label to work across county borders which leverages the interdisciplinary expertise of both the agent and the university and increases visibility of Extension and the land-grant university system as a resource. By positioning Extension in partnerships with other urban universities and regional entities, this addresses the distance disconnect between the land-grant university headquartered in Gainesville and potential clientele in the Tampa Bay region. Fostering sustainability at a community level in a highly urbanized area requires engagement on multiple levels – local governments, residents, advisory members, regional partners, youth (K-12), and college/university students.

At the community level the RSA created regional awareness by partnering with highly visible partners for green expo events and pioneered the deployment of a seven-week community-oriented sustainability training program, “Sustainable FloridiansSM.” In addition to creating knowledgeable sustainability stewards, this program served as a pipeline of newly developed sustainability volunteers who increased visibility of Extension at sustainability activities and events. This complemented the county’s goal of increasing number of volunteers retained and hours of service donated. Additional community-oriented programs included biennial symposia on energy, local and regional film series with colleges and universities, energy efficiency educational programs, and workshops on coastal hazard preparedness, climate change, sea level rise, and food systems planning. To reach diverse audiences, energy efficiency programs for youth and adult were offered in Spanish and translated materials were provided to encourage behavior change. The RSA actively recruited interns from local urban university partners and benefitted from interns placed through a competitive matching process by the land-grant university (University of Florida). Interns contributed to developing social media marketing campaigns, writing blogs, and outreach education at sustainability and environmentally themed events.

At the local government level, the RSA served as de facto sustainability agent for the county and contributed to the development of multiple programs to foster an internal culture of sustainability. The RSA created a website “Green Pinellas” to showcase the county’s efforts toward achieving sustainability and the educational role Extension provided through classes, factsheets, blogs, and videos. The website development and content were supported in part by the sustainable county education committee, a county partner group convened by Extension to provide input and support Extension in its role to promote sustainability awareness and education. The RSA, with support from program assistants, also developed an employee education program consisting of training modules and a green employee pledge to create sustainability awareness among new and existing employees and co-managed the Green Business Partnership Program. Additionally, the agent facilitated face-to-face meetings and workshops with University of Florida faculty and county staff and researched and drafted a green building resolution which was approved by the board of county commissioners. Most importantly, the RSA engaged in state and national certification programs to brand the local government as a pioneer in sustainable local government operations, a reflection of its commitment to creating a sustainability ethic and culture. These programs included Green Local Government Certification from Florida Green Building Coalition and U.S. Green Building Council

[Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design \(LEED\)](#) for Cities and Communities which integrated the well-known STAR Community Rating System.

Impact

Program Impacts

The success of county, community, and regional efforts are documented in the awards and accolades for both the county and the RSA on a national, regional, and local scale. Pinellas County was the first local government in Florida to certify (2006) and be re-certified (2013) under the Florida Green Building Coalition standard, a feat that would not have been accomplished without Extension as its partner. The RSA's work in developing the Green Building ordinance resulted in a gain of 35 percentage points in administration and building/development categories while Green Pinellas, GreenStar programming, and LEED classes earned 37 percentage points in human resources and information services. Award presentations were made at board of county commissioners' meeting for the gold re-certification and 2013 green achievement award for recognition as the highest scoring county. In 2018, the county also earned a 3-STAR (Sustainability Tools for Assessing and Rating) rating with STAR Communities and is recognized as a LEED community amongst 90 national and international cities and communities. STAR was absorbed by the [USGBC LEED for Cities and Communities program](#).

The Green Pinellas website was launched in 2010 and between 2010 and 2014, 14,288 web visits with spikes in 2011 and 2014 were recorded. The most popular pages are energy and environmental health and user surveys launched in 2014 indicated that the most sought-after information was solar. The site is currently under review for update with the county.

Agent (RSA) coordinated the delivery of 13 lunch and learn sessions offered at six county locations for 286 employees. All employees reported the use of efficient light bulbs at home and turning off computer and peripherals at work. Employees were very familiar with personal energy and household budgets but more than 50% reported unfamiliarity with county's energy and water directive indicating a knowledge and savings gap for the county.

The inaugural regional film series was conducted in partnership with the University of South Florida Patel College of Global Sustainability, and 128 participants attended at least one film in the series, 79 returned retrospective evaluations, with a response rate of 62%. Retrospective evaluations revealed that 94% of attendees learned something new and were willing to list new knowledge gained; 94% rated the program excellent, very good, or good; 60% were unfamiliar with Extension as a resource; 34% were more concerned about climate change and 46% were more willing to engage others in a discussion about it *after* watching the film. Three month follow-up evaluations were conducted with participants who provided email addresses (N=24) with the following results: 91% (n =11) fulfilled pledges to attend a public meeting and contact a local official to express support for climate change. Twenty seven percent (27%) joined a local environmental group and 20% took advantage of sales tax suspension to purchase ENERGY STAR and WaterSense® appliances and products. Sharing information learned with friends or neighbors was the easiest pledge to complete (45%) while carbon offsets and new purchases were more difficult. Time (50%) was the biggest barrier identified in the completion of pledges.

Recognition

The RSA received awards from national Extension professional associations for innovative programming, social media/online courses, radio, mixed materials, outstanding educational materials award, and Extension initiative innovation awards.

Excerpt from letter shared from a participant in Sustainable FloridiansSM course “Having retired from a long teaching career, I decided to heed my own advice given to my students- follow your heart and do what makes you happy Part of the requirement for the Sustainable Floridian course is volunteerism. I am looking forward to getting involved in community events around Pinellas County. It is exciting for me to have the opportunity to work with others who have expertise and experience in the many areas for which I am interested in volunteering. These are a few of the benefits I gained from Sustainable Floridians. However, the greatest benefit was in getting to know others with a passion for living sustainably. Our class was comprised of people from all ages, backgrounds, interests yet we found common ground in this course. Ideas were exchanged, support and encouragement offered, and new friendships developed. Knowing that there are other people in the community who feel the same about preserving our world and living sustainability is a huge boost to my own efforts. I am grateful to the Pinellas County Extension for providing such a valuable course to the public. It was just what I needed to help guide me along a more sustainable path.”

Closing Comments and Looking to the Future

Unique Aspects

Extension has an office in all 67 counties in Florida but this position in Urban Environmental Sustainability is unique to Pinellas County and the Southwest District. Extension is a peripheral organization in many of the counties because of the MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) so it is difficult to be fully integrated into county operations which hinders the development of a robust sustainability ethic and performance measures. The achievements attained with Green Local Certification Programs relied heavily on partnerships with key supporters within the county, funding for part-time positions to support data collection, and cost-benefit valuation analysis for certification.

Challenges

Ongoing challenges include shifts in political and funding priorities which slowed momentum on key projects e.g. greenhouse gas emission inventory, employee education, professional memberships, and lack of a central authority for sustainability. The peripheral position could only advance sustainability issues up to a certain point and perhaps that positioning by design offered a prescriptive rather than performative approach for sustainability progress. Despite the challenges, the RSA has created value and interest in sustainability operations locally and regionally and is recognized as an expert in the subject area. The county recently hired its first sustainability coordinator in 2019 and the RSA position originally created in 2005 has been held by the author since January 2010.

Related Programs

To develop a robust, successful sustainability program, the RSA frequently reviewed programs on the West Coast including California and Washington, and Vancouver, Canada, as well as international programs in European countries.

Future

Future efforts will focus on:

- Training programs for employees to support the local municipalities to create educated workforces to support regional work of sustainability and resiliency.
- Integrating equity, principles of DEI, and authentic community engagement processes as communities update and revise sustainability action plans.
- Creating train-the-trainer programs that contribute to building community capacity which ultimately supports quality of life and increases community vitality.
- Developing educational programs that provide information about the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and support integration of those principles in statewide and local projects.

Recommendations

Fostering a culture of sustainability is a long-term process that can only be accomplished with a multi-layered approach to ensure that multiple audiences are engaged. Characteristics of successful programs should include some of the following features (1) identifying atypical Extension partners that have similar educational and mission values to align programs that yield added benefit (2) rethinking traditional educational teaching methods to enable Extension to “stand-out” from the crowd in the urban arena, and (3) a willingness to engage with out-of-the-box subject matter and programming that retain elements of the Extension mission.

Multimedia Documentation/References

The [Urban E-Fieldbook](#) (requires LinkedIn sign in) features the film study <https://urban.extension.org/the-work-of-urban-extension/tampa-bay-region-florida/> and has a link to a poster.

[Statewide Green Building Award Winners Announced by the Florida Green Building Coalition](#)

[2019 Bonnie Teater Early Career Award Achievement Recipient](#)

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Madhosingh-Hector is a Regional Specialized Agent (RSA). She has been actively engaged in local and national urban Extension efforts by planning and participating in the inaugural Florida Urban Extension Conference in 2014, the Florida Urban Task Force, Florida Urban Summit in 2019, and facilitating National Extension Urban Leaders (NUEL) Steering Committee Meetings (2014). She is an active member of the NUEL Professional Development Action Team, supported the 2020 NUEL Inequities Dialogue, and attended and presented at multiple NUEL conferences, nationally and regionally. She is currently in a learning exchange cohort with the Kettering Foundation to explore *Democratic Practices: Creating Spaces for Deliberative Public Life* and its applicability for addressing complex issues. As a current Western Center for Metropolitan Extension & Research fellow, she will be expanding on work underway to develop competences for urban Extension personnel.

Prior to joining University of Florida/IFAS Extension, Madhosingh-Hector worked for the Florida Coastal Management Program at the Department of Environmental Protection as an Environmental Specialist. She has MS degrees in Urban and Regional Planning (FSU) and Environmental Science (FAMU) and a BS in Agriculture (UWI-Trinidad & Tobago).