

Extension Programming to Address Urban Issues

Case Study Snapshot Fostering Sustainability at the Community Level

[Sustainable urban development](#) is essential for protecting the natural environment as well as the wellbeing of people and the society at large ([Bai et al., 2012](#); Kaur & Garg, 2019). To address community wellbeing in the Tampa Florida metropolitan area, Extension focused on fostering sustainability at a community level. 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, renowned for cattle, strawberries, and now hops and hemp. The densely populated and heavily visited coastal community faces issues such as land use planning, sea level rise, economic development, and sustainability. Multiple local municipalities and a plethora of partners make it much more complicated to address and navigate multifaceted issues that often cross geographic borders. The 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.



For the past 10 years, a regional specialized agent in urban sustainability with the University of Florida/IFAS Extension developed, implemented, and evaluated educational programs and initiatives to promote sustainability. This unique position has allowed Extension to showcase its ability to use research-backed information to develop an innovative response to sustainability. Working across county borders leverages the interdisciplinary expertise of the university and increases visibility of Extension and the land-grant 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 agent 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”, a multi-department project facilitated by the Department of Family, Youth, and Community Sciences at the University of Florida.

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 the number of volunteers retained and hours of service contributed. One Sustainable Floridians volunteer commented, “Our class was comprised of people from all ages, backgrounds, interests yet we found common ground in this course.” 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 adults were offered in Spanish and translated materials were provided to encourage behavior change. The agent 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 agent created a website “Green Pinellas” to showcase the county’s efforts toward achieving sustainability and the educational role that 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 agent directed the development of 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. Most importantly, the agent 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. In 2018, for example, the county earned a 3-STAR (Sustainability Tools for Assessing and Rating) rating with STAR Communities and is recognized as a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) community amongst 90 national and international cities and communities. The LEED performance score combines 14 metrics across 5 categories: energy, water, waste, transportation, and quality of life (education, equitability, prosperity, and health & safety). The Extension agent has created value and interest in sustainability operations locally and regionally. Future efforts will focus on employee training programs to support the local municipalities to create educated workforces to support regional work of sustainability and resiliency.

As communities update and revise sustainability action plans, an emphasis will be on integrating principles of diversity, equity, and inclusive authentic community engagement processes. The agent will create train-the-trainer programs that contribute to building community capacity which ultimately supports quality of life and increases community vitality. Educational programs will integrate information from the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#), the [UN Urban Agenda](#), the [National Sustainability Summit](#), and the [World Community Development Conference](#).

[Follow this link for the complete case study.](#)

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