

Fairfield ‘blazing a trail’ for other Iowa cities eyeing sustainability

Community-by-community response to climate change offers Iowa its best chance to become a national leader in sustainability

By BETH DALBEY 1/4/10 6:00 AM

FAIRFIELD — Lonnie Gamble, who lives in a solar and wind powered straw bale home in this Jefferson County community, hasn’t paid a gas or electric bill in two decades. The residents of Abundance Eco Village, a 13-unit subdivision Gamble developed with a partner, hope to replicate his record in their wood-construction homes.

Cypress Villages, a 145-acre subdivision taking shape on organically-certified land north of Fairfield, aims to be Iowa’s first community to be completely LEED-Platinum — the **U.S. Green Building Council**’s highest designation.

The low-powered radio station **KRUU-FM** is believed to be the only one in the country to use solar energy to power its broadcast booth and signal.

And Fairfield Mayor Ed Malloy is listed alongside big-city counterparts New York Mayor **Michael Bloomberg**, San Francisco Mayor **Gavin Newsom** and Seattle Mayor **Greg Nickels** on a list of **the 15 greenest mayors in the United States** compiled by the Grist, a Seattle-based online provider of environmental news.

So, building a sustainable future may not seem like a big leap in a small city where living “off the grid” rates not even a raised eyebrow. But a strategic plan to institutionalize sustainable living is “blazing a trail” for other small Iowa cities, said Brian Crowe, a program manager for the **Iowa Power Fund**.

Fairfield, population 9,500, received an \$80,000 Power Fund grant to develop its **Go-Green Strategic Plan**, which sets forth a broad vision of sustainability upheld by solid goals, aims and objectives its architects think will significantly lighten the city’s carbon footprint.

Impressed by a cultural predisposition to sustainable living in Fairfield, Crowe and the Power Fund board thought Fairfield could serve as a model for other cities of similar size. “There’s really no roadmap at this point,” Crowe said.

Easily duplicated strengths in Fairfield’s plan include methods to establish both baselines in areas such as carbon impact and criteria to measure success, he said. “It’s hard to manage what you don’t measure, and I was pleased to see they are looking at that.”

Crowe thinks a community-by-community response to climate change offers Iowa its best chance to become a national leader in sustainability. “If progress can be measured and quantified, and there is someone on the ground to make sure the program is implemented, it could mean a great deal for Iowa,” he said. “For the things we’re good in — biofuels development and wind development — we’re certainly among the leaders in the nation. But we’ve certainly got a long way to go when you look at energy efficiency as a whole, because a lot of the low-hanging-fruit work has been done.”

‘Big-time accountability’

The sweeping plan addressing environmental, economic and social needs envisions, among other things, wind projects, a local foods system supplying as much as 40 percent of Fairfield’s produce needs, and an already vibrant entrepreneurial spirit burgeoning with new business growth to support green technologies and services.

Support for the plan is broad and those committing to it do so strongly, said Malloy, the sparkplug behind the initiative and Fairfield’s mayor since 2001. For example, he said, the **Dexter Corp.**, a washing machine factory with a foundry operation, offers a \$1,000 cash incentive to employees purchasing hybrid vehicles. But he acknowledges that not everyone in the city believes that human activity is a contributing factor to climate change, or that humans can mitigate their influence, meaning the city’s sustainability council faces an ongoing educational hurdle.

“The focus from the beginning has been on how we can create a culture where we voluntarily do the right thing in terms of managing our resources, capturing their economic benefits and leveraging them in local commerce, in particular, foods, where we’re burning a lot of fuel to get it here, and recycling,” he said. “The bigger vision is how we build and design the community going into the future, whether in designing buildings or managing our natural resources in a way that’s more responsible.”

Scott Timm, Fairfield’s community sustainability director, who was hired in a partnership between the city and **Iowa State University Extension Service**, said “big-time accountability” makes the difference between a feel-good set of values and a plan with teeth.

Businesses and institutions pledging to implement the plan run the gamut from already sustainable projects like Gamble’s Abundance Eco Village to emissions-belching factories, and include elected councils and boards, schools and health-care institutions, cultural organizations, service industries and retail businesses. They’ve signed off on what they’ll do and when they’ll do it, Timm said.

Plan architects also got creative — and practical. For example, an invitation to join the new Green Business Council, made up of the town’s top CEOs, doesn’t come with an expectation for dues, but rather that the business will invest that money in sustainable practices.

Timm said Fairfield’s methodology — holding community conversations facilitated by the **Institute for Decision Making** at the University of Northern Iowa and involving every corner of the community — is a valuable lesson for other cities with an eye on sustainability.



Lonnie Gamble, an assistant professor of sustainable living at Maharishi University of Management, demonstrates how an old satellite dish was converted to provide solar heat for toasting foods. (Photo by Beth Dalbey)

"There are common themes almost everyone can agree on," he said. "We're not asking everybody to go off the grid, we're just looking for ways to tighten things up, promote healthier ways of living and conserving resources. It's not radical New Age hippie stuff, but values everybody can buy into."

The sustainability council is working with the **Iowa Interfaith Power & Light Group** (Iowa IPL), which offers a faith-based response to climate change. The three-year-old organization brings together the voices of Christian, Jewish, Muslim and other faith communities arguing that environmental stewardship is a spiritual concern.

It's a smart bit of strategy, Timm said, because "if the religious communities don't get behind this movement, we are in serious trouble."

By following the plan relating to energy audits of government-owned buildings and schools, Timm said it's realistic to expect Fairfield can not only offset a proposed 7 percent utility increase, but also achieve deep. Gas and electricity costs for city-owned facilities run about \$500,000 annually, and saving just 30 percent of that — a realistic goal, the plan's architects say — amounts to at least one salary for a city employee, an all important consideration during a sour economy.

"That's the low-hanging fruit," Timm said.

Another thing Fairfield did correctly was tap into funding streams, like the Iowa Power Fund, a state program supporting energy innovation and independence.

"If you can really work with your local city government and the utility companies and look into where there are funding options — state or federal — you can get some amazing projects moving," Timm said. "There is some serious funding out there."

Changing behaviors

Dubuque Sustainability Coordinator Cori Burbach said Fairfield's strides help guide similar efforts in hers and other Iowa cities. She took part in a sustainable communities workshop Timm hosted last fall and was impressed by intricacies in Fairfield's plan. "I was really impressed with the local foods program, and the involvement of the local school district and university," Burbach said. "Getting local foods into the schools is really exciting."

Both the **Fairfield Community School District** and **Maharishi University of Management** also have developed educational curricula around the principles of sustainability. The university offers what officials say is the country's first four-year bachelor of science degree in sustainable living with some four dozen courses. Energy independence pioneer Gamble, an assistant professor for the new department, said the breadth of courses epitomize the overarching goals of Fairfield's sustainability goals.

"The sustainable department has morphed from a biology department with six students to a sustainable living department with 90 fulltime students," he said. "Students are involved in innovative enterprises, like a 1,000-gallon-per-day capacity biodiesel cooperative, and wind generator and solar projects."

The building housing the department was slated for demolition, but students convinced university higher-ups to leave it standing and allow them to refurbish it using green technology.

Timm said the schools' efforts go a long way toward institutionalizing sustainable living in Fairfield.

"My impression is that Fairfield is a community of people who want to do good things," said Timm, whose first full day as a Fairfield resident coincided with a Labor Day concert by the Beach Boys, where Mayor Malloy proclaimed bandleader and sometime Fairfield resident Mike Love "energy czar for a day."

"We're finding that people want to get plugged in, and that they aren't afraid to try something new and to find ways to change their behavior," he said. "That's the real key, looking at ways to change behavior."

Beth Dalbey edited the Fairfield Ledger from 1996 to 2001. An award-winning journalist, she has also edited newspapers in Adel and Des Moines.