

## **SURVEY OF U.S. ECOMUNICIPALITIES – 2017**

### ***A Summary***

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#### *History & Purpose of Survey*

Beginning in 2005 and continuing over the next several years, about thirty municipal and county governments in the United States, inspired by the ecomunicipalities of Sweden, officially adopted the same four sustainability principles as these Swedish ecomunicipalities and embarked upon paths of systematic change to community sustainability.<sup>1</sup> These local governments and their communities, ranging in size from pop. 800 to pop. 250,000, are located primarily in the Midwest and East Coast of the United States.

In 2017, twelve years after this movement began in the United States, this survey has been undertaken to obtain a snapshot of what has happened at least in a sample of some of the U.S. ecomunicipalities, and to hear the perspectives of individuals, including present and past local officials and citizen activists, who have been involved with one or more ecomunicipalities over time. The results of the survey are presented under each survey question that was asked.

#### *Who Was Surveyed*

Respondents from nine ecomunicipalities – about a third of all the ecomunicipalities in the U.S., were interviewed by telephone between July and September, 2017. There were 14 individuals interviewed, including five present or former mayors, two city/town managers, and 7 citizen activists and members of capacity centers who assisted or helped to start ecomunicipalities. In a few cases, there were two or three survey respondents from one ecomunicipality whose responses and views were not always the same, which yielded some interesting results. The nine ecomunicipalities from whom respondents were interviewed included the following:

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<sup>1</sup> Ecomunicipalities are local governments that officially adopt a particular set of four sustainability principles, or the Natural Step system conditions upon which these are based, and who commit themselves to a bottom-up, participatory and systematic process of implementing these. The four ecomunicipality principles are: 1) Reduce dependence upon fossil fuels, underground metals and minerals; 2) Reduce dependence upon synthetic chemicals and other unnatural substances; 3) Reduce encroachment upon nature; and 4) Meet human needs fairly and efficiently. Over one third of all Swedish municipalities are ecomunicipalities.

<i>Ecomunicipality</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Urban/Rural/Suburban</i>
Ashland, WI	7,957	Rural
Bayfield, WI	487	Rural
Concord, MA	17,669	Rural/suburban
Fox Valley, WI <sup>2</sup>	74,370	Suburban/urban
Lawrence Township, NJ	29,159	Suburban/rural
Madison, WI	252,551	Urban
Portsmouth, NH	21,485	Urban
Stevens Point, WI	26,420	Urban
Washburn, WI	2,045	Rural

### *Survey Findings*

Half the surveyed respondents consider their municipality still to be an ecomunicipality and another 30 per cent said that the concept is still working in some part of the larger community or government. So, the ecomunicipality concept and practice is still operating in some form in the municipal governments and/or their larger communities, according to the majority of interviewed officials and citizen activists. Two of the ecomunicipalities in the survey still actively use the four sustainability principles as a sustainability tool in their local governments and communities. Interestingly, in the case of two municipalities, one of which had apparently fallen away from the ecomunicipality path, new City Councilors are re-focusing attention on the four sustainability principles adopted in city resolutions years before, and suggesting these once again be used as a tool for guiding sustainable change in their municipalities.

Regardless of their status as an ecomunicipality, virtually all the municipalities in the survey are actively participating in and pursuing sustainability goals and activities, including working and networking with other communities toward sustainability. Perhaps the most remarkable finding of the survey is the amount and range of sustainable development projects and initiatives that the ecomunicipalities have accomplished since their inception. Survey respondents said these sustainable development achievements were a result of their having been ecomunicipalities (See responses to Question 4). These sustainable development accomplishments include:

*Sustainable development activities:* new LEED<sup>3</sup> municipal buildings, electric municipal cars, solar arrays on schools and water plant, new state-of-art wastewater treatment plant, a regional biodigester at wastewater treatment plant. One community now has solar arrays on all school buildings. Green recycling of building materials, plastic bag and

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<sup>2</sup> The Fox Valley is a group of cities and towns along Eastern Wisconsin's Fox River. These include: Oshkosh, Neenah\*, City of Menasha\*, Village of Fox Crossing (formerly the Town of Menasha)\*, Town of Greenville\*, Appleton, Little Chute, Kimberly, Combined Locks, and Kaukana. The starred municipalities have officially adopted ecomunicipality resolutions.

<sup>3</sup> Leadership in Environmental and Energy Design standards for buildings, developed and promoted by the non-governmental U.S. Green Building Council, have become the national standards for green design and construction of commercial and public buildings in the U.S. The program certifies buildings according to levels of performance, such as silver, gold, platinum.

bottle banning and a green marina and campground. Two communities have undertaken Complete Streets<sup>4</sup> programs, including permeable street surfaces, bike paths, handicapped person access, and bike share programs; affordable transport for elders and teens. Food garbage collection and composting, farm-to-table dinners, local organic food production, town/private food cooperative partnerships. School green teams, sustainability education in schools, school orchards, gardens, and food recycling, library educational garden for kids, library seed saving program, K-12 class recycling projects.<sup>5</sup>

*Organizational sustainability initiatives:* Blue Ribbon Climate Change Committee, Mayor's Blue Ribbon Sustainability Committee, new City councilors taking up the sustainability and ecomunicipality mantle (in two municipalities), regional Coastal Resilience Initiative, a Diversity Committee, regional and state sustainability initiatives, comprehensive sustainability plans (one award-winning), hiring of municipal Sustainability Director, County government hiring of Sustainability Coordinator, adopting Paris Climate Agreement goals as municipal goals, a regional ecomunicipality initiative among 5 municipalities and two Native American tribes, community sustainability education and study circles, municipal ordinances for chicken and bee keeping, a volunteer riverfront recycling initiative becomes municipal, regional energy assessment.

The broad range of these accomplishments attests to these ecomunicipalities using a systems approach, rather than a silo approach, to sustainable development, since their achievements span the range of the four sustainability principles and number so many during the passage of just several years.

Another impressive survey finding is the amount of work with neighboring municipalities in regional sustainable community networks going on. Almost all the ecomunicipalities in the survey are involved and working with groups of other municipalities in sustainable community networks, climate change initiatives, community resilience and coastal resilience. One surveyed ecomunicipality had themselves started a regional sustainable community network and a state sustainable community network. In a notable example, the former mayor of Lawrence Township, NJ – one of the Town's original "fire souls"<sup>6</sup> - and members of the Sustainable Lawrence community organization helped found *Sustainable Jersey*, a state-wide organization that certifies New Jersey communities according to the level of sustainability they have achieved. Almost all of the 565 municipalities in New Jersey have been certified by Sustainable Jersey as to their level of sustainability. Sustainable Jersey helps local green teams, made up of residents and municipal staff – get started on sustainable actions in their communities. Sustainable Jersey has allied with the New Jersey League of Municipalities and organizes a yearly conference with them. They also

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<sup>4</sup> Complete Streets is a transportation policy and design approach advocated by Smart Growth America and a coalition of other organizations. Its purpose is to allow safe travel for all users – cars, bicycles, pedestrians, public transport users.

<sup>5</sup> For more information about what Wisconsin municipalities, including ecomunicipalities, are doing in the area of sustainable development, see *Municipal Sustainability Survey: Wisconsin, 2015*, by Sherrie Gruder, University of Wisconsin Extension Environmental Resources Center.

<sup>6</sup> A "fire soul" is a person who has a burning interest in sustainable development and who is willing and able to work hard to bring this about. This term has often been used to describe the people who get ecomunicipalities started.

conduct Webinars throughout the year. More recently, Sustainable Jersey has a school sustainability program in which hundreds of schools have registered and Green teams have formed. Inspired by the success of Sustainable Jersey, the state of Maryland has also undertaken a state certification program for sustainability in municipalities.

In terms of interest in and ability to connect with other ecomunicipalities locally to globally, many respondents are interested, although funding is a major concern. Not surprisingly, the closer the location of get-togethers, the more feasible respondents thought it would be to connect. Most respondents were interested in connecting for the purpose of sharing sustainable development project information and best practices, and also around organizational issues such as how to keep an ecomunicipality process going.

Participating in a tour of U.S. ecomunicipalities was the most popular form of potential connection with other ecomunicipalities. Second was a face-to-face conference; again, most likely to be attended if nearby. About half the respondents indicated they would be willing to pay or seek funding for attending such a conference. Four respondents thought their communities might be interested in a Sister City relationship with a Swedish ecomunicipality. Forms of on-line connecting, such as list serves, Webinars, social media, did not seem useful to the majority of respondents.

Finally, funding concerns were cited as the major barrier to contributing to pay for someone to coordinate ecomunicipality information and conduct networking on a national scale. Respondents said it was difficult enough to find funding locally for this type of function.

### *Next Steps*

We are holding discussions with members of SeKom – the National Association of Swedish Ecomunicipalities – and Sustainable Sweden, about next steps following this survey. We are looking into Swedish Sister City possibilities for those surveyed U.S. ecomunicipalities where interest was expressed, and examining possibilities for a tour of U.S. ecomunicipalities and a conference, and funding to support this. We are sending copies of the survey report to the survey respondents, to whom we express appreciation and thanks for their time and input.