

Benefits of Using the Natural Step Sustainability Framework to Guide Implementation of Madison's Sustainable City Goals¹

Communities are where we live and work, and therefore where the impacts of our collective decisions that affect our land, air and water become most obvious. Madison is charged with planning for our development and managing our systems of waste, water, energy, and transportation, among others, all of which are fundamental to long-term sustainability.

In addition, Madison interacts with many local suppliers and stakeholders. By demonstrating leadership and commitment to sustainability in its own operations, the city can act as a role model for individuals and organizations in the community. In order to do this effectively, Madison will require the engagement of staff at all levels of city government and will need to align individuals and departments with a variety of interests, functions, responsibilities, and time and financial pressures.

The Natural Step Framework will help Madison overcome these challenges by:

- Facilitating the development of a shared understanding of and language for sustainability. A common understanding that is based on science and a system-wide approach will help to align the actions of different city departments and agencies, while still allowing them to work independently.
- Structuring a process for working together to identify, organize, and prioritize actions and investments for sustainable city operations.
- Introducing principles of sustainability that can be used to connect the city's long-term sustainability objectives—as described in the City-Council adopted Blueprint for a Green Capital City—with day-to-day actions and decisions.

The Process

Municipalities around the world have used The Natural Step (“TNS”) sustainability framework to guide their decision making. While each community has different needs and approaches, these municipalities have all used some variation of the following steps:

1) An initial group of city staff and senior managers is introduced to TNS framework. By the end of this introduction, staff should be able to describe TNS

¹ Based on “The Natural Step Canada Services for Municipal Operations” Briefing Note,

and explain why it is relevant to their municipal organization. A one-day introductory workshop is usually the most effective way to achieve this.

2) Next, a core group of city staff members should be trained to be TNS trainers. The goal is to enhance the capacity of this core group so that they can present the TNS framework, facilitate dialogue, identify opportunities, and be internal resource people for as the city implements its sustainability goals.

3) The next critical step is to understand the current sustainability performance of the city as a whole or of particular departments. The Natural Step provides a methodology for performing this assessment using a full sustainability perspective. How is Madison performing in terms of sustainability? Where are high leverage areas for improvement? The output of this process is a Sustainability Analysis document.

4) Using the Sustainability Analysis as a baseline, the next step is to undertake initiatives to improve the overall sustainability performance of the municipality. This may involve coordinating existing programs and activities and/or developing new ones, with the overall goal of incorporating a sustainability perspective into city management systems, policies and plans.

Note that the Sustainable Design and Energy Task Force has already performed some of the work outlined in items 3 and 4 above through its development of the Blueprint document adopted by the City Council.

Benefits

Some of the benefits Madison might expect from using the TNS Framework to implement its sustainable city goals include:

- Alignment of municipal departments and staff toward a common vision of sustainability
- Clarity in assessing and organizing actions and programs for sustainable municipal operations
- Enhanced policies and programs incorporating a sustainability perspective (e.g. procurement policies, environmental management systems)
- Enhanced reputation as a proactive contributor to a more sustainable community