

Cities' Green Accelerator

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PSU program's blueprint helps others build on Portland's success



by: PAMPLIN MEDIA GROUP: JONATHAN HOUSE - Robert Liberty with a bike at the Urban Plaza at Portland State University.

While Portlanders have been biking, recycling, composting, protecting natural areas, keeping a lid on urban sprawl and developing other green infrastructure, the rest of the country has been watching.

For the past year, nine cities have been taking a page from Portland's sustainability efforts and using the talents of 70 local experts to implement their own hometown projects.

They're catalyzing development in their downtown areas, boosting transit-oriented development, managing their stormwater, redeveloping historic sites and taking other actions Portland has helped set the standard for.

It's all part of Portland State University's year-old Urban Sustainability Accelerator program, led by former Metro Councilor and 1000 Friends of Oregon director Robert Liberty.

"The 'sustainable' term may or may not be used in some places, but the elements are pervasive," says Liberty, one of five staff people with the program.

"When I go into these communities, I say some pretty hard things, but I also offer thoughts on how to tackle that," says Michelle Reeves, an urban strategist with Portland's Civilis Consultants, and one of the Accelerator's pool of expert advisers.

The participating cities aren't the usual suspects, like San Francisco, New York or Boston.

They're small to mid-sized cities that may have similarities to Portland in some cases, and in others, couldn't be more different.

They include: El Paso, Texas; Elk Grove, Calif.; Louisville, Kentucky; Portland, Maine; Rancho Cordova, Calif.; Sacramento County, Calif.; Wichita, Kan., and Waco, Texas.

"A lot of these are very unglamorous cities, which makes it kind of fun," Liberty says.

The point isn't to try to make the other cities copy any of Portland's practices. "I say, 'Let me help you make Waco more like Waco,'" Liberty says.

Along with Reeves, the team of expert advisers is a who's who of Portland's sustainable leaders in both the public and private sectors, including former Portland Planning Director Gil Kelley, former Portland

Development Commission Director Don Mazziotti, developer Ed McNamara and economist Joe Cortright.

What's unique about this effort, Liberty and his team say, is that it's not just a one-time consulting deal.

It's a relationship built over the course of a year, starting and ending with a "convening" in Portland that includes neighborhood and infrastructure tours, networking, and lots of talk about sustainable projects and how they can be turned into reality.

Since the project's launch last July, some of the cities' efforts have been going so well that Liberty anticipates some of them will sign on for another year. They'll return to Portland to debrief in July.

"We'll look at what did we contribute, how helpful were we, was it worth it," Liberty says.

Perform economically

Reeves has visited all of the project sites this year except Louisville.

Wherever she goes, she uses a few specific approaches so as not to give anyone a reason to roll their eyes about Portland.

"I use a lot of examples; I'm very concrete- and experience-driven, but I don't use examples from the places I'm working in," she says.

Rather than use Portland as an example, she talks about Hillsboro, Vancouver, Wash., or Gresham, which might be facing the same kind of challenges on the same scale.

Reeves also stays away from the clichéd use of Times Square as an example. "When you're in a town of 30,000 people, nobody cares," she says.

Reeves says considers it her job to give people information so they can figure things out on their own. Some of the communities are very conservative, or are 15 to 20 years behind Portland on how they view green infrastructure.

"It's a challenge; it's a picture that's half painted," she says. "A big part of sustainability is figuring out how to reuse your existing infrastructure."

And having seen the different politics at play, Reeves says she doesn't often use the word "sustainability."

"We say, 'How do we make it economically perform?' People who are struggling economically are interested in figuring out how to make it more sustainable. ... But that's how we talk about it."

Meat on the bones

Here's what's been happening in three of the Accelerator's nine cities this year:

- Waco is the home of Baylor University and several other colleges, but the city is lacking housing in its urban core, and a quarter of its downtown is vacant.

City leaders have been looking to develop pedestrian, bike and transit connectivity as well as other green infrastructure.

Enter the Urban Accelerator experts, which helped the public and private stakeholders engage in a "smarter and faster way," says Lisa Sheldon, board member of the Brazos River Partnership.

One of the most visible signs of progress has been the proliferation of food trucks on previously vacant land, one of the strategies to attract people downtown in the city's "Imagine Waco" initiative.

Sheldon says the full redevelopment will take several years of work. But the partnership has been a reminder that a project of this magnitude isn't possible without everyone on board.

"We want to make sure we get it right," Sheldon says. "(We want to) plan for the future, not just today."

- Leaders in Louisville have been working to revitalize their "SoBro" (South of Broadway) neighborhood, and brand it as the city's first green district, with eco-friendly commercial, residential and public development.

The neighborhood was disurbtd when a freeway was built through it decades ago, forcing residents and



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businesses to flee. Buildings were demolished to make way for the surface parking lot that now occupies 60 percent of the neighborhood's land area.

Louisville leaders were inspired by Portland's neighborhood redevelopments, says Maria Koetter, director of the Office of Sustainability for the Louisville Metro Government.

"I loved seeing the redevelopment in former manufacturing areas as well as all the green infrastructure elements including stormwater capture curb cuts and green roofs," Koetter says.

Since last July city officials have made big strides "connecting the dots" between the major land owners on the site, including two local colleges, Koetter says.

They've identified "shovel-ready" projects to tackle by the end of the year. Some of those include an idle-free neighborhood, installation of bioswales, removal of previous pavement and institution of an advanced recycling and food waste management program.

"Having the guidance of the Urban Accelerator made our project possible," Koetter says. "We had the concept of a green district, but have been able to put the meat on the bones and develop a reliable framework based on our participation in this program."

n Leaders in Portland, Maine have been focusing on sustainably redeveloping the India Street neighborhood by the waterfront, a community settled by the British in 1633.

It's since served as a warehouse, commercial and industrial district, populated by immigrants. In the 1960s a large arterial street cut India Street off from downtown, and many historic structures were demolished.

City leaders have spent the past two decades reviving the neighborhood with new housing, hotels, retail and a major cruise ship terminal that opens this month with service to Nova Scotia. "They're all going to be looking for something to do," says Jeff Levine, director of planning and urban development for Portland, Maine.

When Reeves visited, she suggested ways to attract more retail to the area, and ways for retailers to attract more foot traffic — everything from marketing strategies to making the spaces deeper to be more easily adapted to another use.

The city could have done the project alone, Levine says, but they've been trying to approach it with a broader range of perspectives. Partnering with the Accelerator project has kept them accountable and on task, he says: "It keeps us honest, reminding everyone we need to invest the resources in this."

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