

South suburb to serve as model for sustainable planning

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In the Fairmont community near Joliet, Ill., there aren't any streetlights – or sidewalks. Residents simply walk down the streets.

Nearly a fifth of the community around them is made up of vacant land, and many of the surrounding buildings are playing dress-up with their empty interiors.

Fairmont, an unincorporated community between Joliet and Lockport to the north, is on a to-do list for local sustainable projects that emphasize both environmental and economic elements.

A year into spending \$4.25 million in federal grant money on these projects, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning has used the funds for the initial planning phase of more than 60 sustainable projects in the metropolitan area.

"Sustainability is more than just the environment though," said Bob Dean, the deputy executive director for local planning at the planning agency. "We're trying to include elements related to economic development and also equity, or social factors."

The economic part in these projects' plans is essential for communities like Fairmont, where there's not only vacant land but also vacant buildings, according to Dean. The planning agency's final plan for Fairmont, to be released in December, is expected to tackle the vacancy problem by developing new housing and bringing in businesses, such as grocery stores.

"Small-scale improvements would make a huge difference in this particular community," Dean said.

Not all communities are in as dismal condition as Fairmont. Some, like south suburban Park Forest, already have a sustainable framework, but are still looking for ways to improve.

Straddling the southern border of Cook County, Park Forest has a history in urban planning. Its sustainable infrastructure dates to the village's inception in 1948, when the community was built in harmony with forest preserves on two sides.

"We're lucky. We start with a lot of good sustainability bones," said Hildy Kingma, director of economic development and planning for the village of Park Forest. "But we need to bring in employment in the area so people can both live and work here."

Park Forest is a special project for the planning agency. The agency's sustainable plan for the area, to be released early next year, is meant to serve as a model for other communities in the future.

"Many communities in the region have taken a shot at this, but in dramatically different ways," said Jessica Simoncelli, the planning agency's community outreach specialist. "We researched the best sustainability plans out there nationally and are using the best of those. We're hoping our plan becomes the most adaptable for other areas."

However, don't expect results that you can touch, see or hear anytime soon. Dean said in a meeting Tuesday that his agency has used the grant money, which was awarded through the partnership of three federal agencies, primarily to hire expert staff. The new employees, he said, are doing much of the groundwork for generating the actual plans.

The earliest tangible results from the grant money will be the plans themselves, which will be released beginning in December and continuing into 2012.