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Oak Park is strong on energy, weaker on biking, says first sustainability report card

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Oak Park and River Forest get big thumbs up for increasing their use of renewable energy and keeping more material out of landfills.

But Oak Park falls short in its work to become more walking and bicycling friendly, according to the first scorecard of how far both communities have come in reaching their sustainability goals.

The community sustainability report card, released recently by PlanItGreen, also showed that more needs to be done to reduce water usage.

The Park District of River Forest also must switch to using organic fertilizers in its facilities.

The Oak Park River Forest Community Sustainability Report Card provides a snapshot of progress against sustainability goals created over a 10-month community engagement process in 2010-2011.

Baseline metrics – dating back to 2007 – were created and are being used as a basis of comparison to 2012 data that has been aggregated around energy and water consumption, waste reduction and transportation.

The report card will help support decisions on future policies, strategies, and resource allocation needed to achieve the 10-year plan's goals by 2020.

K.C. Poulos, the village of Oak Park's sustainability manager, was pleased, but noted, "it's not realistic to believe that we can do it all in the first year," Poulos said. "We plan to keep the momentum going so we can reach those 10 year goals."

Gary Cuneen, executive director of Seven Generations Ahead, is encouraged.

"A lot of people are committed to this on a major institution, business and residential level," said Cuneen, whose non-profit organization promotes ecologically sustainable and healthy communities. "We're hoping to make more gains in 2013."

Eric Palm, River Forest village administrator, also is encouraged, but "it's not going to substantially change overnight. We'll move the needle a little bit more every year."

Here's how some of the major parts of the report stack up:

Energy

Community choice aggregation was cited by Cuneen and Poulos as the most significant highlight of the study. After Oak Park approved a referendum in April 2011, the village board signed a contract allowing for 100 percent renewable energy credits, all for wind energy. About 95 percent of the village is hooked in; others already may have contracted under different providers. The community as a whole saved \$3.4 million on its electric bills as of the first quarter of 2013. Other successes include the installation of solar panels at The Avenue Garage and an underground geothermal system to cool and heat the village council chambers, as well as the addition of charging stations for electric cars.

River Forest voters approved community choice aggregation in March 2012. In six months, the community has saved about \$670,000 on its electric bills, said Palm.

Waste

Oak Park and River Forest have increased their overall recycling rates and decreased the amount of waste

they've generated. Oak Park's food scrap composting has gone from a pilot project to a village-wide program. Many of the schools in both communities have adopted zero-waste initiatives. Large institutions such as West Suburban Hospital Medical Center and Rush Oak Park hospitals and Concordia and Dominican universities in River Forest have either begun or are creating programs to reduce the amount of waste they send to landfills. The Park District of Oak Park requires teams using the fields to remove any waste they generate. And Oak Park and River Forest High School has started a composting program.

Some of River Forest's efforts include the River Forest Parks Foundation offering of a green block party. A free Earth Machine compost bin is provided for the block to use; residents can figure out how to use it. And education programs are also part of the package, Palm said. A gigantic recycling event, sponsored by Green4Good, District 90's green team, also got big thumbs up from Cuneen. This year's event is from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m., May 4 at River Forest United Methodist Church, the corner of Lake Street and Thatcher Avenue.

"Waste reduction was a significant highlight for the report; we have the data to back it up," Cuneen said.

Education

Green Community Connections spearheaded major education efforts in both communities – and that work helped create awareness and action toward making both towns sustainable. The group offers a film festival and a whole lot of education in a fun way offering bike tours and a robust website filled with loads of information for both communities.

Transportation

The report card noted that building and sustaining alternative transportation efforts still need work.

Oak Park has made strides in pushing alternative ways people can get around town. A plan to add bike lanes and make the town more bicycle friendly was created in 2008. Bike racks were added at many spots; bike shelters will be installed. Marion Street was revamped so that walkers, drivers and bicyclers all can use the street comfortably. The village touted the health and environmental aspects of driving less.

A lot of work is still needed with respect to the bike plan, Poulbs and Cuneen said.

"A lot depends on budget priorities," Cuneen said. "We in the Oak Park and River Forest communities will have to find creative solutions to realize the goals."

Palm said River Forest has not yet provided charging stations for electric cars or built bike lanes. The village is pretty walking friendly; the next step is "making it more bike friendly," he added.

Mixed results were seen in such areas as water usage, creating a green economy, providing local food options and buying local policies by major institutions.

It will also take a lot of education to get people to change their habits in using water, Cuneen said.

PlanItGreen is a project of Communityworks, a community partnership supported by the Oak Park River Forest Community Foundation. Sophia Lloyd, executive director of the foundation, said her organization was excited by the report card and the measurable accountability it offers. "The indication in this first annual report card show that while there is much more to do, we are working together and making substantial collective impact as we progress towards our goals," said Lloyd.

Seven Generations Ahead, an Oak Park-based not-for-profit organization whose mission is to promote ecologically sustainable and healthy communities, was commissioned by Communityworks to develop the extensive report.

To read the entire report, log on to:

<http://www.sevengenerationsahead.org/images/uploads/planitgreen2012sustainabilityreportcard-final.pdf>.