



Conservation: A Path to Community Sustainability?

By Dave Shideler

Community sustainability is a long-term approach to economic development that attempts to balance economic, social and environmental concerns. Unlike other economic development strategies that might be issue- or project-focused, sustainability takes a systematic approach to economic development that recognizes the interconnectedness of a community's environment, economy and human capital and so leverages the sum of these assets to achieve the common vision of the community. A long-term perspective and an on-going, long-term planning process are required to succeed, but elected officials and economic developers often possess a short time horizon due to political and other reasons. It is appropriate, then, that support for community sustainability comes from outside the local government and traditional economic development organizations.

Conservation seems ideally suited to cultivate and support community sustainability. At its core, conservation has the requisite long-term perspective because it seeks to preserve the community's natural resources for future generations. Additionally, conservation currently enjoys prominence because of recent natural disasters that were either preventable or mitigated by implementation and maintenance of conservation structures. Funding is also available for conservation, with approximately \$6 billion of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds dedicated to conservation-related projects (Oklahoma Policy Institute, 2009). Urgency and available resources make local conservation a prime candidate for initiating community dialogue and promoting community sustainability.

A partnership between the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts (OACD), Oklahoma Conservation Commission (OCC) and Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service (OCES) has begun to develop tools and educational materials on community sustainability. The program is using economic impact analysis to demonstrate the importance of conservation funding to local communities, with the expectation that such information will help facilitate a dialogue across previously fractionalized groups. Communities can then use this inclusive discussion to move toward long-term planning and sustainability.

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Economic Impact of Conservation Funding

Starting the process toward community sustainability with economic impact analysis makes sense on several levels. One of the reasons that conservation and economic development are often at odds is because the two groups do not have a common vocabulary. Conservationists often point to numbers of species protected, tons of soil preserved, etc. in measuring their progress. Economic developers count jobs sustained or created and dollars of capital investment. Economic impact analysis on conservation dollars provides a way of translating conservation expenditures into units of interest to the economic development community. It also makes explicit the economic linkages between conservation practices and local businesses that supply inputs for the practice implementation, such as cooperatives, construction firms, and nurseries. With the results of the economic impact report, conservationists are empowered to communicate with their economic development counterparts.

Secondly, the economic impact analysis provides information that local conservation districts (CDs) can use to grow the local economy. Output multipliers were generated for each reported practice used in Oklahoma, and these multipliers are reported along with the total economic impact of the practice. Output multipliers are a means of estimating how one economic activity will spur additional activity throughout the local economy. For example, Waste Storage (including septic tanks) had a state multiplier of 1.8; this means that every dollar spent on waste storage generated an additional \$0.80 of economic activity in Oklahoma. This additional economic activity includes the fabrication of the septic tank, drainage pipes, and other components made in the community, as well as the household consumption resulting from the payroll of the septic installers and the factory workers who made the tank. Since the local conservation districts have some

discretion in prioritizing the practices appropriate within each district, choosing practices with higher multipliers will generate higher economic activity for the local community. Such action by CDs is a small but significant step in advancing the practice of community sustainability.

One example of this strategic prioritization involves the practices of Range Planting and Prescribed Grazing (RP/PG) versus Pasture and Hay Planting (PHP). Table 1 compares the multipliers between RP/PG and PHP. RP/PG represents more 'bang for the buck'; this is because the practice requires purchasing indigenous grasses, which will most likely be locally produced. Also, these practices lead to higher value-added agricultural products than hay. If one were to reallocate all \$1.7 million spent in Oklahoma on PHP to RP/PG, more than \$700,000 of additional economic activity would be generated. This is illustrated in the last column of Table 1.

Next Steps Toward Community Sustainability

In addition to the state report, we are developing and distributing a report that details the economic impact of each conservation district's expenditures on the county economy. These reports will detail the levels of funding by practice across all programs, illustrate the multiplier effect associated with these practices, and interpret the results for the district staff. An Extension Fact Sheet and in-service training for conservation district staff are being developed in conjunction with this local report. These training materials will educate CD staff on how the reports were generated and how to use the reports to initiate a community-wide dialogue for planning purposes.

Conclusion

While community sustainability encompasses more than just conservation, conservation is an issue that can motivate communities to begin thinking about sustainability. Tools that are being developed in cooperation with OACD and OCC will enable conservation districts to demonstrate short-term economic benefits and equip them to engage the broader community in longer-term planning. Once the community dialogue has begun, an expectation exists that other community issues will also be addressed to cover the economic and social dimensions of community sustainability.

References

Oklahoma Policy Center. 2009. "The Federal Stimulus Package: Funds Available to Oklahoma State and Local Governments." Budget Brief, February 2009. Accessed online, March 9, 2009, at 8:50 am. <http://www.okpolicy.org/files/OKPolStimulusbrief.pdf>

Author's Picks for Further Reading

William Grunkemeyer and Myra Moss. 1999. Key Concepts in Sustainable Development. In *The Web Book of Regional Science* (www.rrri.wvu.edu/regscweb.htm), ed., Scott Loveridge. Morgantown, WV: Regional Research Institute, West Virginia University.

Sustainable Development Initiative, Ohio State University Extension – Community Development Program

<http://sustainabledevelopment.osu.edu/>

About the Author

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	Multiplier	Total Impact if all PHP were RP/PG
Range Planting/Prescribed Grazing	2.1839	\$3,741,455
Pasture and Hay Planting	1.7652	\$3,024,139
Difference		\$717,316

Table 1. Comparison of Economic Impacts