

Sustainability Committees

Several neighborhood associations in the southeast coalition area are forming sustainability committees as a way to improve the urban environment of their communities. While climate change is a global issue, groups of neighborhood activists are working together to find local solutions to the problems that affect us all.

What is a Sustainability Committee?

Many neighborhoods have recognized that there is a need for action at the local level, but each group might take a different approach. There are many issues that can be taken on as a project. Each neighborhood can work on different projects, using a variety of techniques and have equal success.

Here are some examples of projects sustainability committee could work on:

- Learn about simple home energy saving techniques and help neighbors apply them.
- Create a neighborhood wide communication network using email, where neighbors can share information, tips and resources about how to act in a more sustainable way.
- Create a goods sharing program where neighbors can borrow tools and equipment from each other instead of each person buying their own.
- Invite experts to give neighborhood-based workshops on topics such as bicycle commuting, gardening and composting, energy saving strategies, etc.
- Work with neighborhood cleanup coordinators and Master Recyclers to hold a more sustainable cleanup (see Neighborhood Cleanup Section).
- Share resources through neighborhood websites and newsletters.

There are many organizations and groups in Portland that are working hard to help people lead a more environmentally responsible lifestyle. There is no need to re-invent the wheel. Simply providing information to neighbors and creating a space where people can talk and share ideas is a very positive step a neighborhood association can take. Many people want to live in a more sustainable way, but do not know how. A neighborhood sustainability committee is an easy, fun and effective way to help.

Why should a neighborhood association form a sustainability committee?

Aside from the environmental benefits of forming a sustainability committee, it is also a great way to get more people involved in your neighborhood association. A sustainability committee offers something new that will appeal to a broad range of people. There are people in every neighborhood that would like to be more involved and this provides an avenue outside of the normal activities of a neighborhood associations.

With all the attention sustainability issues are getting from local government and all of the individual efforts happening in our communities there is a real need for organized action at the neighborhood level. There is a gap that needs to be filled between government and individual community members. Individuals acting alone can only go so far, but by providing your neighborhood with a forum for people to share ideas, experiences and encouragement you can help people collaborate on their efforts.

How do you start a sustainability committee?

Starting a committee is easy. It is just a matter of finding the right people who are willing to volunteer some time to the effort. If existing board members are unable to devote the time and energy to organize the committee, do some outreach to recruit new participants. There are people in every neighborhood who would be excited to work on a project like this. It is only a matter of promoting the idea and finding some willing volunteers.

Here are some simple ways to recruit for your committee:

- Write a newsletter article describing the idea and ask for help forming the committee.
- Mention that you are looking for a volunteer to lead a sustainability group at monthly meetings. Newcomers to meetings are often looking for a way they can get involved.
- Put up flyers at farmers markets, community gardens and businesses in your neighborhood.
- Have information available at community events.
- Use word-of-mouth. Talk to people about the idea. Ask people to spread the word.

- Ask people directly. Personally asking people you think might be interested is by far the most successful approach.

When asking people to volunteer describe exactly what responsibilities are involved. Let them know that it requires a few hours of time per month, including attending neighborhood association meetings to give updates. You could also create a Sustainability Committee Chair position on your board to recognize the importance of the position.

Next steps?

Once you have recruited a group of excited and energetic volunteers to lead your sustainability committee hold an initial meeting to establish the purpose of the committee. Talking about the issues affecting the neighborhood and learning about individual interests, skills and abilities will help project ideas emerge.

Digging Deeper

The Center for Earth Leadership

Offers free courses on organizing for environmental change.

www.earthleaders.com

Southeast Uplift staff can provide assistance with outreach, meeting facilitation, project planning and implementation.