

# The Minnesota “GreenStar Cities” Initiative

*A voluntary program to identify, support and recognize sustainable actions by local governments*

## Concept Paper

July 2008

Communities all across Minnesota are looking to provide leadership on ways to “go green” through meaningful local actions. But what is green? And how is a “greener city” made a reality through practical, meaningful, and measurable actions at the local level?

“Green” covers a wide umbrella, including reducing carbon emissions, increasing energy security, and simply using resources wisely. For communities, being green may entail everything from rethinking land use planning and stormwater ordinances to improving residential, business, and government building energy efficiency. Ultimately, it is about making decisions to create strong, healthy, ecologically sound, and economically-viable communities for present and future generations. But what are the “best practices” to achieve these goals?

*The “GreenStar Cities”<sup>1</sup> Initiative is a voluntary program to identify, support and recognize implementation of a set of sustainable development best practices that lead cities beyond compliance and encourage a culture of innovation.*

Specifically, the GreenStar Cities Initiative seeks to:

- Provide a “pathway to sustainability” — cost-effective and pragmatic best practices for local governments to achieve superior outcomes in a broad range of sustainable practices, including energy, water, buildings, transportation, and development
- Provide indicators and benchmarks to assess progress and achievements
- Recognize local governments for their efforts and achievements
- Help direct local governments to tools for financial, educational, and technical assistance and identify where additional assistance is necessary
- Help local governments lead the way and be a model to inspire their residents, businesses, schools, congregations, and other organizations and associations to take action

## Partners

Initiated by the volunteers and staff of the Clean Energy Resource Teams (CERTs) partnership ([www.cleanenergyresourceteams.org](http://www.cleanenergyresourceteams.org)), the development of the Minnesota GreenStar Cities program is led by the Green Institute as a collaborative effort, continuously expanding, that currently includes the following organizations:

- League of Minnesota Cities
- University of Minnesota Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships
- Minnesota Office of Energy Security, Department of Commerce
- Pollution Prevention and Assistance Division, Minnesota Pollution Control Agency
- The Minnesota Project
- The Green Institute
- Center for Energy and Environment
- Great Plains Institute for Sustainable Development
- Southwest Regional Development Commission
- Urban Land Institute MN

<sup>1</sup> “GreenStar Cities” is the working title for the program described in this paper but the name for the program may change as we gather further input.

## **Program Design**

With initial seed money provided by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, the GreenStar Cities Initiative is beginning program development. Broad participation in developing the program design will be essential to its success. To accomplish this, a stakeholder group will be convened to help develop the program. We anticipate having a draft of the program design by early 2009, and starting to pilot the program with selected local governments in mid-2009. Legislation passed in May 2008 (SF 3096) requires a report back to the legislature on progress by February 2009.

### ***Included voluntary actions***

We anticipate the program to include voluntary actions in the following areas that local governments control or influence, although these areas will be finalized based on stakeholder input:

- Increased energy efficiency and conservation in city buildings and other infrastructure (*e.g.*, LED traffic and street lighting)
- Use of renewable sources for energy generation
- Sustainable landscape design and management
- Parks, open space, habitat, and other recreational facilities
- Brownfields redevelopment
- Urban forestry and street greening
- Public outreach, education, and involvement programs
- City green purchasing and investment policies
- Surface water protection and stormwater management
- Healthy community programs
- Adoption of green building standards for city buildings and promotion of green building for city residential and commercial buildings
- Transportation, city fleets, and transit options (*e.g.*, increased vehicle efficiency, etc.)
- Bike and walking trails and other infrastructure
- Promotion of local foods and agriculture
- Land use planning and development policies and practices
- Creation of sustainability management (*e.g.*, coordinator, committee)
- Recycling/waste prevention
- Efforts to track and benchmark progress
- Regional collaboration (promote multi-city planning, ordinances, etc.)

### ***Questions to be addressed***

We anticipate that the program design might include some minimum best practices and some optional items across the broad range of categories. For the program design, some key questions that will need to be addressed by the project team and stakeholders include:

- What categories of activities will be covered (energy, water, development, etc.)?
- What are the best practices for each?
- How will individual best practices be weighed or compared against one another and updated?
- Who will administer the program (including monitoring and verification)?
- How will GreenStar Cities fit with other certification programs?
- What technical and financial assistance will be necessary for cities to implement this program, and who will provide that assistance?
- What funding currently exists to help cities with their initiatives?
- How can state funding be aligned to support cities in becoming greener?
- Will there be different programs or requirements for different sizes of cities, or different types of cities (*e.g.*, based on size or amount of development)?

***Relation to other programs***

GreenStar Cities is envisioned to be similar in function to other challenge and rating programs such as the US Green Building Council’s (USGBC) LEED program; although no such program currently exists that serves local governments. Recently, ICLEI, in partnership with the USGBC, started development of a national local government program called “Star Communities Index.” While this effort, like ours, is just getting off the ground, we would strive to work in conjunction with national partners to best meet the needs of Minnesotans. The GreenStar Cities program will be shaped specifically to meet Minnesota Cities’ conditions and needs. GreenStar Cities is intended to be the first initiative of a broader effort—GreenStar Communities—to work with cities, local businesses, schools, congregations, and other community institutions on local actions to become more sustainable. GreenStar Cities is thematically identified with the Minnesota GreenStar Certified Homes and Remodeling program for residential housing, as well as the Environmental Audit Program (EAP) Green Star Awards, although both are separate from GreenStar Cities.

**Contact**

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