

# **Sustaining Sustainability: Interview with Katherine Gajewski, Director of Sustainability, City of Philadelphia**

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## **Can you tell the readers about the Office of Sustainability and Greenworks Philadelphia?**

**KG:** This is a new field and a new component within government. This all came about from an advocacy effort in the mayor [Michael Nutter's] race in 2007. One hundred thirty different nonprofits, community groups came together to form the Next Great City Coalition.

Greenworks is a result of that. It's starting to force government to think in a more integrated and systems-based way. There are not necessarily a lot of initiatives that set a vision for the city, specific metric-based goals and then map out a role that all the departments can play. [What's unique about Philadelphia] is Greenworks has done that.

There's a piece of Greenworks that is starting to advance the conversation around questions of access and equity:

How are we really thinking about neighborhoods and residents? Are they being well served or underserved to certain markets and to quality of life assets like:

Tree coverage

Air quality

Access to open space

Access to healthy and local foods?

For instance, we used to think about parks and ask: "Where is there space to build a park?" Now we ask: "Where is there a community in need and where is the best place to make that investment?" We're no longer looking to build another park in a part that already [has] open space. We're looking at where the gaps are.

**Explain your goal to make Philadelphia the greenest city in the country? Is this a collective effort?**

**KG:** Quality of life and quality of urban environments connected to sustainability was what [residents] saw as inherent and essential. They wanted to become the greenest city.

Now we are hearing from the private sector and colleges. This is coming from all directions. The role of the mayor is to provide top-level leadership and vision to say we think this is good for Philadelphia. We think this is the type of city that not only delivers quality of life for residents, but also, in the long term, delivers economic growth opportunities and situates us to be more resilient for

climate trends we see coming.

## **Do you have specific examples of how your work is cutting-edge?**

**KG:** Two areas that come to mind are:

The dramatic shift around transportation share.

We have seen a pretty significant decrease in car ownership and a jump in bike use. We have increased the number of miles in bike lanes. We are one of the top three cities in the country for percentage of residents that commute to work by bike. We are bringing Bike Share to the city. We have had to rethink how we approach parking and bike lanes and the share between bikes and cars.

The work the water department has done as a part of their Green City Clean Water program.

They took what traditionally would have been a federal, legal mandate to build more concrete tunnels underground and working with the mayor forced EPA to allow us to make the investment largely aboveground instead through intensive green infrastructure. Over the next twenty years, we will support one of the largest public works investments of our generation. It's going to be greening half of the city's landmass. That investment is going to

Improve communities

Create open space

Help reduce flooding in vulnerable neighborhoods

Stabilize and enhance real estate value in certain neighborhoods

This next generation will have very visible and tangible things to see about how a city can be connected to nature.

We're going to restore

Waterways

Ecosystems damaged in the last couple of decades due to industrial growth

The scale of that investment is massive and the implications are astounding.

## **How will residents see the changes?**

**KG:** A weekly visible example is: we are all recycling now. Recycling has now surpassed twenty percent Five years ago, we didn't recycle as a city.

Now we're asking:

Are we ready to look at composting and how we divert food waste?

Are we ready to start thinking about next generation waste management?

## **How does the Office of Sustainability define**

## innovation?

**KG:** My definition of innovation is simple. It is figuring out how to work efficiently and collaboratively towards the goals you have set. Innovation can sometimes be as small as process innovation.

Within a bureaucratic setting, [process innovation is] figuring out ways to work within systems and working across different agencies in a new and more effective way. We've seen innovation come about in the way government collaborates with partners outside of government. When we worked on benchmarking legislation, we had a coalition of partners outside of government come together to support the effort.

We're learning that innovation can happen both in the cutting edge and also within a process. Sometimes you're on the cutting edge. With the storm water management initiative, we are the first. But sometimes, you're not on the cutting edge. Sometimes you're on the second wave watching others go ahead of you and you're learning from their process and how to make the concept relevant in your city. There can be innovation there too—in retooling the concept; in figuring out how to move the ball forward on an initiative that may have been opposed in previous years.

A lot of what we are focused on now is making sure we can **sustain sustainability**.

We want our work to be relevant across multiple administrations, multiple political contexts and deeply rooted in the government agencies and departments.

We are working on training programs to help make sure building facility staff understand energy management and have the tools and knowledge to help bring it into the work they are doing with city buildings. If we can fundamentally reapproach facilities management to have energy efficiency as an integrated part of their work, [then it] is innovative.

**Has there been interest from other cities to replicate what's happening in Philadelphia? Is Greenworks a national model?**

**KG:** We are constantly interacting with other cities doing sustainability work. I am the cochair of the Urban Sustainability Director's Network—comprised of my peers in 100 different U.S. and Canadian cities. This field is new. It's a very collaborative and supportive space. Someone is coming from London to study our green infrastructure program to figure out how they can take some of the work here back to London to get more green roofs on their buildings. Collaborative is deep, constant and goes both ways. We borrowed heavily from New York City's Plan NYC framework in developing Greenworks.

In Philadelphia, we work with quasi-government agencies like SEPTA and Philadelphia Housing Authority. We see

them as a part of our extended family. They are both building sustainability plans based on Greenworks.

In Pennsylvania, there's an effort underway to see if there is a shared framework that smaller city's can be a part of to help advance their initiatives—even if it is smaller scale. In that way, we have shared the Greenworks plan to see if there is replication within our major target areas, which are energy, environment, equity, economy and engagement.

### **How do you measure success within those five major areas?**

**KG:** We made Greenworks heavily measurable. We set quantitative goals wherever we could. The best decision we made was to do an annual progress report. We spend four months out of every year working with each department to understand where they are with their various initiatives. We do metrics, measurements and reporting to ensure we are progressing towards each goal.

### **Would you like to share any final thoughts?**

**KG:** I talked about the private sector and the alignment we are seeing with their interest in sustainability. We have also seen a lot of neighborhood groups in Philadelphia thinking about sustainability. We are really lucky.

We have a really robust network of community groups and civic associations in the city.

From Point Breeze to Mt. Airy, we have seen, independent of the Office of Sustainability, activity around urban gardening, farm programs, energy efficiency education programs and groups pushing for green affordable housing.

For more information on Greenworks Philadelphia visit <http://www.phila.gov/green/>