

Clifton, New Jersey

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INTRODUCTION

There are many ways to define sustainability. Most definitions stress an emerging social contract that balances the enhancement of social equity, care for the environment, and economic viability. A common thread through all of them is the consideration given the generations that follow and their inheritance. When considering the truly long range, it is possible that the private sector may be able to develop innovations to replace many kinds of environmental services that we now derive directly from nonrenewable sources. Yet, in our view, it is governments that the ability and responsibility to effectively oversee sustainability efforts. One initial way for governments themselves to begin to act more sustainably is the adoption of durable patterns of consumption that stress renewable source materials, the preservation of precious places for the future, and reusing and recycling whenever possible.

Looking over northern New Jersey from a bird's eye view, you see a landscape frequently described as a concrete jungle. Hidden within are many different municipalities; each has its own unique characteristics and culture. Within the northern New Jersey landscape, Clifton has created an identity as a model city for particular maxims of sustainability including a nationally recognized recycling program, preserving open space and involving citizens in the process.

BACKGROUND

The City of Clifton, New Jersey, is not a city known by many outside of the northern New Jersey region. Clifton's population is nearly 80,000¹ and it has seen a steady population growth in during the past fifteen years². The city is located in Passaic County, ten miles outside of New York City, and has its roots in industrial textiles (Anzaldi 2007, pers. comm.). While Clifton may not be the largest town, especially with respect to some of its neighbors, the efforts they are making to help create a sustainable community are some of the most astonishing and impressive. The success and pride Clifton has had with its environmental programs have not come without hard work. Many obstacles, such as financial concerns over the programs and investments, have led local citizens to become involved in the long-term thinking over Clifton's future; they knew that they would have to conquer all obstacles, in order to achieve the desired result.

¹ U.S Census Bureau, 2005 Population Estimates

² State of New Jersey , Department of Labor & Workforce Development: New Jersey Resident Population by Municipality: 1930-1990

In 2007, Clifton's recycling program received the US EPA's highest award, The Environmental Quality Award, for their work in the Waste Wise program, which the city had joined in 1999³. What has made, and will continue to make, Clifton's recycling efforts successful is the outreach and education to the community. Clifton annually circulates information packed recycling calendars and has a robust infrastructure of recycling collection facilities, as well as curbside pickups. Clifton's system and infrastructure is able to accommodate most products and materials. And most importantly, the citizenry has not ignored the message.

"Clifton is a very unique place, you make the call to the people and people follow the order. It is a very fiscally conservative place, civic pride and financial responsibility" (Anzaldi 2007, pers. comm.).

Clifton started on multiple fronts to make the move to becoming an environmentally friendly community and arriving where they are today. One was as a simple program to help plant more trees in the early 1990's. From there, Clifton's environmental efforts have expanded greatly, supported by their lifelong residents who are personally motivated and led by innovative minds (Shukaitis 2007 pers. comm.). By taking the initiative to do simple things, such as spray stencils on freeway underpasses to reduce or eliminate graffiti (Anzaldi 2007, pers. comm.), the citizens have shown that they have a heart-felt interest in making their city improvements a success. The road has not been without challenges, nevertheless Clifton has committed itself to these efforts and continues to receive the reward of a more vibrant and satisfied community as a result.

FIRST STEPS

Most people in our society see a tree in many ways: a source for shade, a buffer between uses, and for some, a source of sustenance. Nevertheless, most people, perhaps, would acknowledge the value of a singular tree. People perceive them as an abundant resource. However, in a place where "open spaces are being eaten up by black top and buildings are continuously being developed", (Kolodziej 2007, pers. comm.) individual trees suddenly inherit a far greater value.

Clifton was one of those places in the early 1990's. As center of economic boom and a rapid development machine, the town's residents were fostering a desire for more greenery in their neighborhoods. According to former Mayor of Clifton Gloria Kolodziej:

"Right now Clifton has only three percent open space... It used to be all farm and open land when Clifton started. The need for trees was, essentially, a grassroots campaign (Kolodziej 2007, pers. comm.)."

During the environmental revolution of the early 1990's, many environmental and conservation groups were creating mild political pressure and calling for earth friendly policies and programs. What resulted was a tree-planting program, still active today. The program is responsible for planting over 500 trees per year, paid for through grants from various organizations. Citizens have also contributed by participating in the Adopt-a-Tree program.

"The tree planting program has been successful because Clifton owns it's very own tree farm," (Greco 2007, elec. comm.).

Since the adoption of the tree-planting program, the City of Clifton has also implemented an open space program in which Clifton buys "for sale" lots, for the sole purpose of keeping them open spaces. The Mayor estimated that, to date:

"The City of Clifton has been able to acquire approximately 75 acres of land that will not be used for commercial development" (Anzaldi 2007, pers. comm.).

³ EPA Environmental Achievers, 2007

The Tree Planting Program and the Open Space program were only the beginning of Clifton's efforts. There are many more issues to address. Clifton would have to find a way to reach out past the environmentally concerned residents and involve everyone. Many movements and efforts wither and die because only a few people are involved and they are unable to broaden participation and involvement. In order to get the entire population involved and interested in making their city a more sustainable community, there would need to be innovative and involving programs in place.

PROGRAMS

One program that has been successful in public outreach, is the Clean Communities Program, created in 1986 due to the littering problem in the state. Revenue from State of New Jersey taxation on litter-causing products funds the program. With this money, cities like Clifton are required to provide programs to support litter cleanup and removal, educational programs, graffiti cleanup, enforcement of anti-littering laws and sponsor the "Adopt a Highway" Program (DuBois 2007, pers. comm.).

One way that Clifton uses these funds is in its landscaping program. Through this program, the city not only meets some of the criteria for the Clean Communities Program, but also gets its residents involved as well. Through the landscaping program, a citizen adopts a piece of land. They are responsible for the upkeep of the land, and the removal of trash & litter on the property. They may also choose to do landscaping, such as planting flowers. Currently, more than seventy-five 501(c), non-profit organizations participate. These organizations are eligible to be reimbursed for their efforts by up to \$250. In addition, landscapers specifically can have their annual permitting fee of \$150 waived if they participate in the program. Now in its eighteenth year, the program oversees the adoption of around 200 properties in the city (Anzaldi 2007, pers. comm.).

Clifton also makes an effort to hold large community events. For example, Clifton celebrates Earth Day, and gives out trees to those who cannot afford them.

"If citizens can't afford a tree, they can get on a tree list. After that, they will be given a tree and all they have to do is maintain it" (Kolodziej 2007, pers. comm.)

One of the biggest parts, of both Clifton's environmental efforts and aims of New Jersey is Clean Communities Program, is reaching out to the public through education. The City of Clifton goes to great lengths to educate the public on its nationally recognized recycling program, holding annual clean communities presentations with skits put on by children of the community and over fifty organizations.

The Clifton Department of Recycling also, holds many workshops and forums for businesses, neighborhoods or to the public. During these informational sessions, people can learn the benefits of recycling, as well as how to identify recyclable products and the proper sorting of them. The Recycling Coordinator, Al DuBois, organizes these events.

When I was young, recycling was just coming about. I started getting involved in environmental clubs. ... I grew up in Clifton, and as time moved on, I became the recycling coordinator" (DuBois 2007 pers. comm.)

One of the key areas where the City of Clifton provides the most outreach is to the Clifton Public School District. They gear many of the workshops toward young people to help make the next generation more environmentally conscientious. Marie Hakim, President of the Clifton Board of Education, and Liaison to the schools in the Clean Communities Program, talks about building relationship between the CCP and the schools:

The Clean Communities Program is headed up by the city ... The schools are here to participate in the activities that Clean Communities hold. (Hakim 2007 pers. comm.).

Mayor Anzaldi added that “In the middle school and high school, they have a conservation club and in the high school, specifically, they keep a ‘peace garden’” (Anzaldi 2007, pers. comm.).

The “Adopt-a-Tree” Program is closely associated with the Tree Planting Program. Citizens are also responsible for one of the trees in the Clifton Organic Tree Farm. The duties associated consist of general upkeep, such as pruning.

Clifton also has programs that help encourage at home activities that will help the environment. Through these informational sessions, the City of Clifton educates its residents on things, such as how to compost properly in their backyard. They have also provided the public with information on energy efficient products ranging from: things inside the home, appliances and light bulbs, to other everyday luxuries, such as hybrid cars. The citizens can learn a wide array of topics through workshops and forums through the Department of Recycling.

The City of Clifton not only encourages its residents to be environmentally friendly, but also is an example. It has taken many steps to make the city buildings and assets better for the environment. City Manager Al Greco says:

Hybrid cars are being purchased by Clifton to replace the city’s fleet and replacing the V-8’s with V-6’s ... New light bulbs with energy efficiency are being installed in city buildings to use less energy. (Greco 2007 pers. comm.).

By using various programs to connect with the public, Clifton has overcome a major obstacle. With people interested and involved with the city’s environmental efforts, Clifton only needed to give the citizens reasons and ways to become involved. Today they will attest to an 85% participation rate by its citizenry. As Mayor Anzaldi put it:

“The people in Clifton rise up to the occasion; with a small community they feel banded together”. (Anzaldi 2007 pers. comm.).

RECYCLING IN CLIFTON

While Clifton has a wide arsenal of programs to help make their city and citizens more environmentally friendly, there is one program that is the gem of them all, that is: a nationally recognized recycling program.

The biggest accomplishment we have had is our award winning recycling program. (Greco 2007 pers. comm.).

It was born in the 1970’s, before the huge increase in the cost of garbage collection. The City Council began the effort (Anzaldi 2007, pers. comm.). Eventually they set up a recycling center, so that people could drop off their goods.

The recycling program was way ahead of the times ... We did some proactive things like advertising and working with the Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts and schools. There was some value to newspapers back then, something like a \$1.00 USD for every 100 pounds, or something like that; so, various organizations used it as a sort of fundraiser. (Anzaldi 2007 pers. comm.).

The recycling program in Clifton is very accommodating for residents. The city provides two ways for the citizens of Clifton to get rid of their recyclables. One way is the curbside pick up in which a recycling truck comes to houses to collect the recyclables. The city collects the materials separately and treats them as a commodity. The city picks the recycling up every three weeks and provides the citizens a calendar to resolve any concerns as to when the city will pick up their recycling, on occasions when the

regularly scheduled pick-up day falls on a holiday or otherwise. People must take certain things like plastic directly to a recycling center, as the aggregate volume would be too cumbersome to manage with curbside collection. (Anzaldi 2007, pers. comm.).

“Curbside pickup is convenient and encourages recycling ... We also provide metal pickup by appointment so that it can be reused. (Greco 2007 pers. comm.)

Clifton has diverted at least 34% of total household waste as a result of its efforts and revenue exceeds \$13 per ton. The city uses the revenue to pay for its the overhead costs and currently earns more than \$200,000 per year from its current contracts (WasteAge, 2001).

Clifton also has a drop off depot for other recyclables. This is useful for high volume items such as plastics, and especially for hazardous materials, such as computer parts, batteries and tires. The drop off depot makes it cheaper and more convenient for people to dispose of those things the right way.

In addition, the city picks up over 40 types of waste from businesses on a weekly basis and provides can & paper recycling for all city employees (Anzaldi 2007 pers. comm.). The Mayor explained that:

There are a lot of things that must recycled by law, rubber or tar roofing, car tires, same thing with motor oil. Some of those things we are ahead of the state law, some of the things we are with the state law. For 79,000 people we are pretty active in most things (Anzaldi 2007 pers. comm.).

Many times, the effort and hard work put into something goes unnoticed, but this is not the case with Clifton. Clifton has been able to garner respect and recognition from the environmental community nationwide.

RESULTS

The saying goes that nothing beats a hard day's work. For Clifton, it has been many a hard days' work to obtain their reputation and stature among the environmental community. Throughout the years, Clifton received and continues to receive many different awards and honors. Some of these honors include being an EPA Model Community, being a Tree City for the past decade, being part of WasteWise, as well as numerous awards received for their recycling program.

One measures results, not only in awards and honors but also in per annum changes, benefits and improvements to culture that the people who live and work in Clifton experience.

It used to be that developers took down healthy trees and they were never replacing what they took, but now they have to. There is awareness, education, property maintenance as well as being sure that the application of federal grant money is towards healthy trees. Clifton has now implemented, by law, when a new building goes up, only the trees in that building's footprint can be taken out, the rest have to stay. Also, when new roads are set in place, in a neighborhood, each house will have a new tree planted in the yard (Kolodziej 2007, pers. comm.).

The most important accomplishment that Clifton has made is its reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. It is in this respect, that the efforts to become more sustainable are measurable. In 2001, Clifton reduced its greenhouse gas emissions by 233,357 metric ton carbon equivalents. To provide a scope for how much this is, it would equal, approximately, the removal of 175,400 cars from the road for an entire year.

While there have been many successes, the task of becoming more sustainable and environmentally friendly is far from done. As former Mayor Kolodziej says:

Clifton still faces “the same problems as everyone else. ... There is overcrowding in New Jersey. Rivers are being polluted (Kolodziej 2007, pers. comm.).

All the government is doing is putting this on the backburner and they need to start doing something about it before it's too late (DuBois 2007, pers. comm.).

According to Steve Shukaitis, Clifton also needs to work together on a more holistic level addressing and including the growing minority populations. He believes there will be an enhancement of the results, with respect to combating greenhouse gases, as well as becoming more sustainable, if each individual group coordinates its efforts, synergizes. There are also areas for improvement, in terms of more reliable energy sources, for, not only Clifton, but for the entire country. Deploying energy efficient projects has become difficult.

Energy efficient projects, such as turbines, solar panels, and other innovative methods of saving energy are hard to sell," (Greco 2007 pers. comm.).

Perhaps the most critical view is the need for a whole new look regarding recycling. While the increased effort for recycling is good, it still has its downfalls, since it uses up a great deal of energy and many of the recycled material still ends up sitting in a landfill.

We need to implement the use of refillables and reusables into our communities. This would help cut down on a lot of the energy used in recycling and processing. Why not reuse a container more than once, this would cut costs on the energy used to make that container or to recycle that container. We still would be recycling, but we would also be saving money too. We need to simplify and we need real solutions. We are not solving the problems; we are just replacing one with another (DuBois 2007 pers. comm.).

CONCLUSION

The City of Clifton has gone to great lengths to become a more sustainable community. Given the size of the community, few municipalities can mount a challenge to the effort, impact and results achieved in Clifton. Through their programs, regarding recycling and public education, Clifton has not only made a difference on the environment, but has also provided a culture change for their community and future generations.

While they have and will continue to confront many of the problems, what are the next environmental issues with which Clifton, as well as society as a whole, will to be challenged? It will be up to the next generation to remain environmentally conscious and provide the hard work and innovation necessary to take on the challenge.

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