Red Light, Green Light

Decision making with SAM, the Sustainable Action Map

A one page decision-making tool developed as a student project helps the City of Olympia, Washington make balanced, transparent decisions supporting increased sustainability, even when the issues involved have many ramifications. You're invited to try it.

by Amy Buckler

A sustainable community is one that persists over generations and is farseeing enough, flexible enough and wise enough to maintain its natural, economic, social and political support systems.

This sustainability vision for the City of Olympia was created by a citizen task-force in the early 1990s. In 2005, recognizing the need to reinvigorate the City's sustainability efforts with a focus on tangible action, the City Council adopted the goal of putting sustainability into action as one of its too long-term priorities.

The next year, a group of Department Directors, called the Sustainability Super Team, formed. The team recognized that sustainable action starts with balanced decision-making, and that the City need-ed a decision-making model to help assess the impacts of any decision on the community as a whole, as well as being easy for all departments to use.

To help develop this model, the City teamed up with the Evergreen State College. Six undergraduate students designed a sustainability decision model part of a class project. The students named themselves STARS, or Students Toward Achieving Realistic Sustainability. After ten weeks of work, what emerged was the Sustainable Action Map.

About SAM

The Sustainable Action Map, lovingly teferred to as SAM in the Olympia organization, provides a framework for approaching the community as a holistic system. Systems thinking is the foundation of sustainable decision making; it helps illuminate the relationships between social, environmental and economic issues. SAM ultimately helps the City deliver a level of service citizens expect, and do so in an environmentally and socially responsible way, while ensuring the best economic choices for the long-term.

Strengths

Weaknesses

Opportunities

Threats

SAM includes the following three dimensions, which work together to facilitate systems thinking:

Sustainable Action Map (SAM)

How does this decision impact

environmental health?

· Fewer plastic bottles in waste stream.

Addresses climate change-a decision not to

use a product that relies heavily on burning

of fossil fuels during production & transport

· At first (until everyone carries a cup), it will

be necessary to provide paper cups- also an

unnecessary waste of Earth's resources.

· To influence culture/ change behavior

· Using more paper cups when the only truly

sustainable thina to do is use reusable cups.

narmful to the environment.

Action: Provide pitchers of H2O & encourage use of reusable cups at City functions. Department: City-wide

Individual

N.I.C.E. represents the four key components of sustainability: the Natural, the Individual, the Community, and the Economy. All four must be in balance to achieve a sustainable solution.

How does this decision directly

impact the well-being of

citizens and employees?

· Always offering healthy water as an

· Potentially, commonly used sinks contain

(something to keep in mind in the event of

more aerms than individual water bottles

· Sustainable action makes us feel good.

· Making bottled water taboo may

discourage some employees from

hydrating during the work day.

a germ outbreak).

alternative to sugary beverages.

S.W.O.T. stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. When filling out a SAM, a S.W.O.T. analysis is done to assess the decision's impact on all four sustainability components.

The Stoplight system indicates how well a particular action achieves each component. For example, if the light is green, the action provides value to that component (more strengths and opportunities), lift its yellow, there are risks, but they are manageable. If it is red, there may be fatal flaws (many weaknesses and threats). A red light should prompt leadership to consider innovative solutions and overcome risks before moving ahead on that issue.

SAM in action

In Olympia, SAM has been used for everything from purchasing to policy decisions.

SAM to argue for a higher boot allowance in an AFSCME (American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees) contract. His argument was that the amount the City provided each year for work boots allowed employees to purchase only cheap boots, which hardly lasted the year. A higher boot allowance would enable employees to purchase higher grade boots. Such boots would last multiple years, and therefore be a more efficient use of natural and financial resources. SAM helped the employee clearly illustrate his points and justify them as sustainable. In turn, the City raised the boot allowance and is able to offer it less frequently so as not to increase overall costs.

One Public Works' employee even used

Olympia also used SAM to help formulate a bottled water policy. Like many cities, Olympia is concerned about the negative impact bottled water has on the environment and municipal water utilities. Many

city organizations have banned themselves from purchasing bottled water or are finding creative ways to market their tap water. In early 2008, the City's Executive Team used SAM to articulate possible effects of a new policy to provide pitchers of water at all City functions and encourage the use of reusable cups.

SAM revealed the following threats for the City to consider when shaping the new policy:

In some circumstances, providing pitchers may increase the use of paper cups, when the only truly sustainable thing to do is use reusable cups.

Making bottled water taboo may discourage some employees from hydrating during the work day.

Discouraging bottled water may send a competing message against the City's 72-hour preparedness message to store bottled water in case of an emergency.

Despite these threats, SAM also revealed several strengths and opportunities in the new policy, which was given a green light. Understanding the threats and weaknesses, however, is vital to shaping and communicating policies so as not to undo other needs and goals. A holistic perspective on any action is especially important when shaping organizational culture, which sustainability initiatives often grompt us to do.

One of the most exciting things on the horizon for Olympia is a Capital City Challenge against Montpelier, VT. The two cities have challenged each other to a duel to become the most sustainable capital city in the United States. Each city will write its sustainability goals into a resolution, and hold each other accountable for achieving the goals outlined in the resolution. Olympia will use SAM as the framework for thinking through and communicating its goals. As part of the challenge, city employees will be encouraged to use SAM more often and to share and communicate using SAM with the community.

Community How does this decision How does this decision impact impact relationships, effective the local economy? What are its government, social justice, costs, both now and over the and overall liability? long-term? · Less plastic bottles in the waste stream · Tap water costs less than bottled water. · City sends a message that it has committed to providing water sustainably. · Since the City does not spend much on bottled water to begin with, the City will not save much money. · Upfront cost - each department's investment in pitchers/igloos & cups. · To walk our sustainability talk. · To use this policy as a symbol of how to decrease To inspire/lead/ask people to commit to associated costs of waste as part of our zero waste carrying a resuable cup. · To take pride in Oly water. · May send mixed messages about storing bottled water for disaster preparedness. Leadership Require Manageable Risk Value Delivere

You are invited to use the Sustainable Action Map. Check out Olympia's website at http://www.olympiawa.

gov/community/sustainability/SAM for a template along with more information, testimonials and tips.



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year-old daughter, she enjoys hiking, biking, and being on the water. Her favorite thing is the sky.

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Sustainable Action Map (SAM)

Action: (PAC) Parking Fines, Citations and Rates

Department: Public Works



Natural: How does this decision impact environmental health?

Individual: How does this decision directly impact the well-being of citizens and employees?

Community: How does this decision impact relationships, effective government, social justice, and overall livability?

Economy: How does this decision impact the local economy and what are its costs, both now and over the long-term?

S: By increasing fees and fines to market rates, individuals will better understand the true cost of parking and will be more likely to consider alternatives to driving alone.

S: Appropriate market costs for parking fees, citations and rates will ensure turnover in downtown and increase available parking for citizens and employees.

S: Appropriate market rates will ensure a more efficient use of existing parking stalls through increased turnover and less employee parking.

S: Market Rates will place Parking Services in a stronger financial picture. Higher turnover of parking stalls will provide better availability of parking for new construction downtown.

W: Higher rates might cause individuals to search for lower cost parking. This may cause individuals to drive their vehicles for a longer period of time searching for low cost parking.

W: Higher parking costs will be absorbed by citizens, businesses and employees.

W: Higher parking rates will effect certain individuals (low income). This might be perceived as not taking their interests under consideration.

W: Higher parking costs will be absorbed by citizens, businesses and employees.

O: Continue working with IT to find low cost alternatives to parking outside of the core and transporting individuals into downtown.

O: Businesses could help pay for patron parking through a token validation program.

O: Conduct a educational campaign to inform citizens, businesses and employees of the changes and what individulas can do to find assistance. The feasibility of a new parking

O: The feasibility of a new parking structure is enhanced.

T: ______

T: Higher parking costs will have a financial impact on individuals (especially low income individuals).

T: There could be a perception that all Parking Services is about is money and isn't taking the needs of the community under consideration.

structure is also enhanced.

T: Higher parking costs might keep some individuals out of downtown Olympia or from utilizing Parking Services. This might have an effect on Parking Services budget as well as downtown busineses.





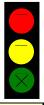
Sustainable Action Map (SAM)

Department: Public Works and AFSMF Unit

Leadership Required

Action: Increase boot allowance for purchase of quality U.S. made boots Manageable Risks

Value Delivered



Department: Public Works and AFSME Unit			Value Delivered
Natural: How does this decision impact environmental health?	Individual: How does this decision directly impact the well-being of citizens and employees?	Community: How does this decision impact relationships, effective government, social justice, and overall livability?	Economy: How does this decision imxpact the local economy and what are its costs, both now and over the long-term?
S: Boots are repairable - lost longer - less boots in landfill. Not Imported - less fuel - used to transport - less pollution.	S: Comfortable feet promotes quality work and safety.	S: Promotes an ethic of non-disposibility. Promotes safety and health. Promotes skilled craft.	S: Many manufacturers in Northwest - White's, WESCO, Danner, Viberg, etc.
W:	W: Higher initial cost - benefits realized later.	W:	W: Higher initial cost - savings realized over a longer period of time.
0:	O: Safety and health PPE and ergonomics lower sick days, fewer L&I claims.	O: Local repair shops will benefit.	O: Economic impact to local businesses, manufacturers, and repair persons.
T:	T:	T:	T: