

PPI Metro Policy Play #2

AUGUST 2018

By Mark Ribbing



Location: Charlotte, NC



Program: Envision Charlotte

Play: Connect downtown buildings on a dashboard showing energy and water usage; share proven practices for cutting utility costs and reducing emissions.

Results: Significant declines in energy use and carbon output; proven cost savings.

Charlotte is one of the high-growth “winner metros” of the Sun Belt – a banking capital with a sparkling downtown (the locals actually call it Uptown); major-league sports; and an expanding, increasingly diverse population.

While that growth has brought significant benefits, it has also presented challenges.

By the start of the 21st century, Charlotte was suffering from a marked increase in air pollution, and was designated as a “nonattainment area” by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Two important results followed the EPA designation: First, Charlotte established monitoring stations that tracked the emissions of various pollutants, including carbon. Second – and even more importantly – government and business leaders began seeking ways to address both air pollution and rising energy costs.

Jim Rogers, the visionary CEO of the Duke Energy utility, joined forces with Charlotte Mayor Anthony Fox, Mecklenberg County Commissioner Jennifer Roberts, and other local leaders to craft an energy and air-quality

initiative that addressed the sustainability challenge at the most basic level – day-to-day individual and organizational behavior.

The result was Envision Charlotte, a first-of-its-kind public-private partnership. Since its founding at the start of this decade, Envision Charlotte has made measurable progress on its twin aims – reducing energy costs and protecting the natural environment of one of America’s fastest-growing metro areas.

Envision Charlotte began with a plan to connect 61 Uptown buildings – all of them 10,000 square feet or larger – on a common information grid that generated a continual stream of data on energy and water usage. Instead of just getting a utility bill at the end of each month, building managers now had meters that posted usage information every few minutes.

While major businesses like Duke, Cisco, Verizon, Bank of America, and Wells Fargo played a crucial role in moving the project forward, local government was also vital to the development of Envision Charlotte. The Uptown urban core included several city and county government buildings, and officials agreed to put those structures on the network along with business, academic, and non-profit facilities.

In addition, the city and county governments were natural conveners for the wide-ranging collaborative that Envision Charlotte had become. By 2012, the founders of the initiative had developed a working board that “had all the influencers and parties that were needed to get stuff done in Charlotte,” said Amy Aussieker, who was brought on the following year to serve as the initiative’s first executive director.

But, while they had their network, the participants didn’t have a clear tactical

understanding of how each of the buildings could reduce emissions and costs. Outside consultants were flooding the initiative’s leaders with a wide variety of plans on how to do it.

“They had a hard time wading through what you should do for these buildings,” Aussieker said.

Finally, organizers turned to one of Envision Charlotte’s most important public-sector partners, the local University of North Carolina campus. UNC-Charlotte offered faculty and students to conduct independent audits of each building, looking for the specific tweaks – large and small – that could help each structure save more and pollute less.

The recommended changes were practical, achievable, and readily understandable: Close off unused conference rooms; install revolving doors; switch to more advanced thermostats.

These and other prescriptions were as effective as they were straightforward. Energy use in the 61 partner buildings was down 16.1 percent as of June 2015. Carbon emissions were down 19 percent. And the building managers couldn’t help but notice that they had saved a combined \$26 million in energy-related costs.

They weren’t the only ones to take note. In September 2015, the Department of Energy announced a grant to expand the Envision Charlotte program to 200 buildings. The following January, Charlotte hosted officials from 10 other U.S. cities – ranging in size from Greenville, S.C. to New York City – for a seminar on how to implement programs of their own.

A similar gathering took place in 2017, and the one in 2018 will include non-U.S. cities for the first time, reflecting the growing international interest in the program.

The Netherlands – a small, sea-soaked nation whose very survival depends on making smart trade-offs with Mother Nature – has been especially intrigued. The country’s U.S. ambassador has hosted Envision Charlotte leaders in Washington, D.C., and officials from Charlotte and the Netherlands have visited one another to consult on useful practices.

While the value and urgency of Envision Charlotte’s work is clear to many, the program’s organizers have known from the start that they would have to demonstrate that value convincingly in a state whose legislature has gone so far as to ban public agencies from using certain climate extrapolations to predict sea-level rise.

“We just talked about reducing costs,” said former County Commissioner Roberts, who later helped oversee the program as mayor of Charlotte. “Who can argue with saving on utility costs and with reducing taxpayer expenses? Especially with the companies involved reducing their cost bottom-lines too?”

Roberts pointed out that the taxpayer savings have extended well beyond the Envision Charlotte network.

“We have 170 schools in the county,” she said. “They’re not actually part of Envision, but we shared our findings with the school district, and they implemented a lot of that, and they ended up saving \$2 million a year in utility costs.”

Charlotte has a “weak mayor” system of government, and direction of the project rests largely with the city manager’s office. Following the inauguration of new mayor Vi Lyles last December, Envision Charlotte not only retains its municipal support – it is looking to extend its ambit.

It has recently taken steps to branch out from its original focus on air quality, energy usage, and carbon emissions. It is working with the local water utility and other area organizations to help ensure sustainable water resources as the region’s population continues to grow. In addition, it is teaming up with waste-management companies, building managers, and engineers to increase recycling, encourage the reuse of materials, and reduce the burden on area landfills.

LESSONS FOR LEADERS

- Know that there's already a proven blueprint for cutting costs – and carbon emissions – in urban downtowns, and that the savings from such programs can be significant.
- Don't go it alone: Involve local business, academic, and nonprofit partners to expand the footprint of the program; increase the level of overall savings; and build broad public support for your efforts.
- Share findings and practices with others in your city – even those who might not be part of your original network. This will further increase cost savings and build the local consensus in favor of community-level action on energy efficiency and pollution reduction.

To learn more about Envision Charlotte and how its lessons might apply to your community, visit envisioncharlotte.com or contact aaussieker@envisioncharlotte.org.



The Progressive Policy Institute is a catalyst for policy innovation and political reform based in Washington, D.C. Its mission is to create radically pragmatic ideas for moving America beyond ideological and partisan deadlock.

Founded in 1989, PPI started as the intellectual home of the New Democrats and earned a reputation as President Bill Clinton’s “idea mill.” Many of its mold-breaking ideas have been translated into public policy and law and have influenced international efforts to modernize progressive politics.

Today, PPI is developing fresh proposals for stimulating U.S. economic innovation and growth; equipping all Americans with the skills and assets that social mobility in the knowledge economy requires; modernizing an overly bureaucratic and centralized public sector; and defending liberal democracy in a dangerous world.

© 2018
Progressive Policy Institute
All rights reserved.

Progressive Policy Institute
1200 New Hampshire Ave NW,
Suite 575
Washington, DC 20036

Tel 202.525.3926
Fax 202.525.3941

info@ppionline.org
progressivepolicy.org