



Minnesota Pollution Control Agency

[MPCA Home](#) > [Sustainability](#) > Sample Criteria for Sustainability

Sample criteria for evaluating the sustainability of community ideas and projects

Flourishing communities are the foundation of a healthy society. City blocks, neighborhoods, towns, townships and cities are of a size where individual efforts at community improvement can effect visible change. In local communities all of our nation's complex issues — housing, jobs, business development, crime, public participation, personal and community values, and the natural environment — present themselves. But how does one choose which efforts will reap the richest and most long-lasting rewards?

The emerging concept or ethic of sustainability, or sustainable development, provides us direction. Sustainable development can be seen as "development that maintains or enhances economic opportunity and community well-being while protecting and restoring the natural environment upon which people and economies depend. Sustainable development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." (Minnesota Legislature, 1996.) The perspective of sustainability calls upon us to invest our time and energy in efforts which simultaneously strengthen the environmental, economic and social dimensions of any issue.

Here are criteria adapted from a draft paper written by the civic group [Sustainable Seattle](#) which suggest a range of interrelated issues that communities should consider in choosing more sustainable courses of action.

Community Development

How well does an idea contribute to a sense of community among neighbors and to key features that make a community strong — its residents, businesses, government and institutions.

- **Civic engagement:** Encourages the participation of all affected people in decision-making, and supports the civic values of trust and cooperation.
- **Use of local resources:** Respects and uses local people and their knowledge, and local energy and materials.
- **Accessibility:** Allows for transportation and information access within and outside the community while fostering alternatives to single occupancy car use.
- **Quality of life:** Improves individual opportunity for a sense of fulfillment in life, and brings beauty into physical designs.
- **Public safety:** Improves the community's sense of security.
- **Education:** Supports learning and skill development for people of all ages.
- **Community history:** Respects the values, traditions, and historical elements of the geographic area.
- **Community identity:** Helps citizens feel a sense of belonging to the community, and fosters commitment to the geographic locale.
- **Neighborliness:** Supports good human interactions and relationships among diverse people within the community.

Ecological Health

How well does the idea take ecological opportunities and limitations into account?

- **Carrying capacity:** Keeps levels of pollution, consumption and population size within the environment's ability to handle them.
- **Ecosystems:** Maintains or enhances ecosystem functions (watershed quality, biodiversity and habitat - including wildlife corridors).
- **Resource use:** Reduces reliance on toxic chemicals and non-renewable resources, and uses renewable resources at a rate that can be maintained over time.
- **Land use:** Uses land prudently, assuring quality wild and productive lands and compact urban development featuring pedestrian- and transit-oriented mixed-use development (for people of all ages) with access to green space.
- **Waste reduction, reuse, and recycling:** Reduces resource consumption, focuses on preventing waste and pollution, locally reuses and recycles materials, and responsibly manages waste.
- **Energy:** Promotes use-reduction, renewable energy, and greater efficiency in the use of energy resources.
- **Clean water:** Reduces water use, water pollution, wastewater and stormwater generation.
- **Clean air:** Prevents and reduces air pollution.
- **Healthy buildings:** Promotes healthier indoor environments through improved air quality, lighting and space use.
- **Peace and quiet:** Reduces noise and light pollution.

Economic Health

How well does the idea take the economic well-being of the community into account?

- **Meaningful work:** Provides for rewarding volunteer work and paid work opportunities at living-wage jobs.
- **Business variety:** Promotes diversification of the local economy in terms of business type and size.
- **Economic vitality:** Improves opportunities for new and existing businesses, emphasizing smaller, locally-owned businesses and value-added industries for local products.
- **Economic self-reliance:** Links area businesses, products and services, and resources and customers to increase the recycling of money, barter labor and other resources within the community .
- **Economic feasibility:** Is sound from a financial and human resources perspective and includes incentives for public acceptance.
- **Pricing:** Strives to price goods and services to reflect the full social and environmental costs of their provision.

Social Equity

Does the idea promote greater equity within the community and with people outside the community, as well as between present and future generations?

- **Who gets the benefits:** Distributes the various benefits of the idea fairly within the community.
- **Who pays the costs:** Does not place an unfair burden on any group within the community.
- **Fairness to other communities:** Does not unfairly impact people in other parts of the city or region, or in other parts of the world.
- **Fairness to future generations:** Considers the well-being of those community members who will inherit the impacts.
- **Affordability and access:** Promotes fair and affordable access to housing, services, and opportunities within the community.

Connections, Trade-offs and the Long Term

How well does the idea consider the connections among issues, make balanced trade-offs where necessary, and seek to understand its impacts into the future.

- **The seven generations test:** Considers impacts on the community 175 years from now.
- **The big picture:** Takes into account the links among social, economic and environmental issues.
- **Public-private partnerships:** Elicits support from businesses, local government, and citizen organizations.
- **Trade-offs in the community:** Seeks to meet social, economic, and environmental goals simultaneously. When it can't, it makes reasoned and balanced trade-offs, informed by the community's core values.
- **Trade-offs outside the community:** Includes a mechanism for reaching as cooperative a solution as possible where there is conflict with the goals of other communities or organizations.
- **Improvement over time:** Includes adequate feedback mechanisms that will tell citizens whether goals are being met; allows for future course corrections.

This page was last updated January 2003

Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, 520 Lafayette Road, St. Paul, MN 55155-4194
Phone: 651-296-6300, 800-657-3864; 24-hour emergency number: 651-649-5451 or 800-422-0798; TTY: 651-282-5332, TTY 24-hour emergency number: 651-297-5353 or 800-627-3529 proteus