

Seattle's Innovation Engine

Leading the Transition to Regional Sustainability

The greatest source of wealth for Puget Sound is our amazing pool of creative talent.

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Our Historic Opportunity

We are at a defining moment in our region's history. Seattle is on the verge of becoming a global innovation center at the intersection of social technologies, sustainability practices, and participatory democracy. We have one of the most educated and engaged citizenries in the country. We have elected a mayor and county executive who are passionately committed to sustainability principles in local government. And we are in the midst of the greatest convergence of planetary challenges ever to confront humanity.

Now is the time to lay the foundation for ensuring that Puget Sound becomes THE flagship for sustainability in North America. The era of tepid responses and half measures is over. We are ready to be bold, swift, and visionary. We are ready to take action. Our objective is simple:

Make Seattle the first carbon neutral city in North America – and do it by 2030!²

Many of the solutions already exist – walkable communities, regional food supplies, vibrant local economies, and empowering civic institutions – researched and implemented to various extents by groups around the world. But never have they been pulled together in one place. This is our opportunity to make Seattle the leader in regional sustainability, and a guiding light for the rest of the world.

We will achieve this vision by building a tight network of interconnected systems that orchestrate the vast array of existing activities in the region's social businesses, non-profits, government agencies, and research institutions. A vision like this requires architecture for collaboration that integrates activities across sectors

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² A special thanks to Alex Steffen for galvanizing us into action around this powerful vision.

throughout Puget Sound. The purpose of this document is to stimulate dialogue about how we're going to do it.

Why Seattle? Why Now?

Culture: Seattle has a long history of re-inventing itself.³ Each boom-bust cycle has shown it to be a phoenix that rises from its own ashes (quite literally in the case of the Great Seattle Fire of 1889). This is a place known for bucking larger trends and challenging the status quo. There is strong value placed on creativity and exploration, combined with an ethic of action-oriented pragmatism. This is a place where people are proud to live. And we've always been unusually connected to the natural world around us.

Size: The city is small enough to make significant changes, yet big enough to make a splash. Seattle has a population of roughly 600,000 and the encompassing Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue metropolitan statistical area is the 15th largest in the United States, and the largest in the Pacific Northwest.⁴

Geography: As a midsize city, Seattle rests in a metro region containing nearly a third of the state population,⁵ with geographic constraints that make density-oriented developments necessary as well as smart for the long term. Agricultural capacity exists throughout the state to provide a regional food supply within a few hundred miles of Puget Sound. We already provide much of our own hydro-electricity, and enjoy a wet climate that provides an adequate regional water supply.

The region's temperate climate is buffered by proximity to the ocean and the protective enclosure of mountains on either side, protecting us against the violence of greater climatic volatility in other areas like the Midwest and desert Southwest. All of these factors make it possible to become regionally self-sufficient if we muster enough creative forethought.

Economy: With a vibrant tech industry, we have a highly educated workforce capable of system thinking that other cities envy. Decades of high tech innovation have created an investor culture that knows how to nurture visionaries and help them make their dreams real. Our manufacturing base has suffered significantly from globalization, but could be revitalized with jobs dedicated to building new sustainable infrastructure for the region. As one of the least equitable cities in the nation, we have a responsibility (and an opportunity) to build livable communities by activating and retraining of our workforce.

Reputation: Seattle is known around the world as the Emerald City, a place where lush greenery intuitively seems to signify a commitment to sustainable practices.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Seattle

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seattle>

⁵ <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/53/53033.html>

Alex Steffen of *World Changing* described our reputation as the city “where unicorns take out our recycling” – but noted the considerable gap between this impression and the reality of our poorly designed city. Still, we do have the cultural will to live up to our reputation and deliver on the unspoken promise it implies.

Timing: And, of course, timing is of the essence. Even as the planetary climate is destabilizing, confidence in social institutions is its lowest ebb at least since the early 1970’s.⁶ This is our opportunity. Confronted with mounting global challenges, *regional resilience* is the name of the game. With our tremendous social and physical capital, along with rich cultural resources necessary to make the change, Seattle really can become the first carbon neutral city.

Building an Innovation Engine

Seattle has a long history of *thinking about* sustainability issues. We have in our midst the expertise and commitment to generate countless solutions. Indeed, considerable effort has gone into describing how to measure sustainability,⁷ design ecological urban environments,⁸ visualize walkable neighborhoods,⁹ and create a sense of hope tempered with sobering knowledge of what we’re up against.¹⁰

Our difficulties lie in implementation.

What we need now is a catalyst, the organizational capacity to connect the great minds in our midst and facilitate collaborations throughout the region in a way that builds over time.

What we need is an innovation engine – a set of social practices and organizational structures that promote ongoing stimulation of new ideas, combined with mechanisms that can reliably and effectively channel those ideas into a flourishing network of collaborative projects.

The ultimate goal of the innovation engine is to align talented visionaries within government, investors and bankers, the business community, planners and developers, agriculture, labor, non-profits, and teaching and research institutions. We will need coordinated leadership across these sectors to set the course and develop a strong, detailed shared vision of our future if we are to transform our city into the sustainable model that leads the way for others to follow.

⁶ <http://nortonbooks.typepad.com/everydaysociology/2009/11/losing-confidence-americans-and-social-institutions.html>

⁷ <http://www.sustainableseattle.org>

⁸ <http://www.greatcity.org> and <http://www.cascadeland.org>

⁹ <http://www.walkscore.com>

¹⁰ <http://www.worldchanging.org>

The idea of an innovation engine is not new. We have two models to build on – one established in the early 1990's in Silicon Valley and another in 1996 in Rockville, Maryland.

Case Study in Innovation #1: Joint Venture Silicon Valley

An innovation engine called Joint Venture Silicon Valley provided a vital structural component for the success of Silicon Valley.¹¹ A large-scale, comprehensive planning process was created for the regional economy to ensure competitive advantage over other technology centers in different parts of the world.

JVSV brought together academia, local industries, government agencies, and organized labor to identify shared challenges and opportunities. This allowed representatives from each arena to talk past their boundaries and promoted convergences across sectors. It provided a steering committee for performing economic assessments and guiding overarching policy trajectories.

For example, researchers at Stanford could identify promising new technologies, engage government agencies to facilitate interactions with private industry through subsidies and modified zoning laws, while partnering with local companies to invest in an endowed chair so they could establish leadership in the emerging research field. Similar synergies were found going in all other directions, too. Through this process, Silicon Valley was able to attract world-class talent, capitalize quickly on emerging opportunities, and thus remain a strong leader in computing technologies for decades.¹²

Case Study in Innovation #2: The X Prize Foundation

Another innovation engine called the X Prize Foundation was established to direct creative efforts around the world toward an inspirational and visionary goal.¹³ A clear process was designed to focus innovations around this singular objective, with the first team who achieves it getting the highly coveted X Prize worth \$10 million.

The X Prize was modeled after the \$25,000 Orteig Prize, offered in 1919 by wealthy hotelier Raymond Orteig, to the first pilot who could fly non-stop between New York and Paris. The prize was finally won in 1927 by an unknown airmail pilot named Charles Lindbergh. Lindbergh won the hearts of a nation, and his world-changing achievement spawned a \$300 billion aviation industry.

X Prize competitions capture the imagination of the public and speed radical breakthroughs that can ultimately change the way we see ourselves and how we live on this planet. The X Prize Foundation began as an organization that started with

¹¹ <http://www.jointventure.org>

¹² Learn more about this history in *Regional Advantage: Culture and Competition in Silicon Valley and Route 128* by AnnaLee Saxenian (1996).

¹³ <http://www.xprize.org>

one initiative and successfully branched out into a large, cohesive organization that uses the power of people to solve big, complex, and expensive problems.¹⁴

Seattle's Innovation Engine

We can build an innovation engine of our own right here in Seattle. Our inspiration comes from both of these models. JVSV demonstrates that comprehensive planning processes, combined with joint efforts across key sectors, can help a regional economy to thrive and maintain leadership throughout the world. The X Prize Foundation demonstrates that a compelling vision can unify people around shared goals and unleash immense creative potential.

Combining these features into a single innovation engine will be our task. Seattle needs collaborative planning and visioning practices that unleash our creativity and set the course for our trajectory into the sustainable future.

Creating a System of Synergies

Seattle's innovation engine should comprise the following functional elements. Each is starting to be developed now.

Shared Values And A Collective Vision

Every community is grounded in a set of *shared values and social norms*. Seattle has a unique culture of pragmatism combined with intellectual insight. It is a culture that lacks pretension and places more value on effectiveness than appearances. These attributes provide the social capital necessary to build an innovation engine.

The cultural glue that ties a community together is the collective vision that constitutes a *shared sense of identity*. Our vision is not merely the objective of becoming carbon neutral, but everything we'll need to accomplish on the way to getting there. This necessitates the articulation of cultural values and social norms that unify us into a cogent "we" that makes it easy to for us to recognize one other.

The *visioning function* emphasizes a cultural unification that arises when individuals recognize themselves as part of a larger community. We'll need iterative visioning exercises that result in the "branding" of the region's particular culture. The unique creative culture of Puget Sound has not yet been captured in hotbed terms like 'Civic Software', 'Gov 2.0', and 'New Urbanism'. We need a brand to cement this set of innovations into a story that is memorable and easily recognizable to the outside world, just like Silicon Valley did for computing technologies in the last century.

¹⁴ It is worth noting that the X Prize Foundation is currently partnering with the University of Washington's Evans School of Public Affairs to develop a model for innovating toward addressing social challenges. This creates an opportunity for collaboration consistent with the intent of this prospectus.

At the heart of this visioning process is a web of societal ideals, aspirations, and core values that shape the identities, priorities, and goals of local innovators. This web, once constituted, will provide the foundational identity that creates resonant feelings that connect us one to another.

A Collaboration Network

Anyone familiar with the Seattle scene knows that we've got some incredibly talented people in our midst. What we've lacked is the capacity to harness this talent pool into a coherent system of creative throughput. The engine we're building is structured and fed through a vast network of collaborators gathered around our collective vision that provides exactly this capacity.

The *collaboration function* emphasizes adaptive engagement wherein experts rise into leadership roles when they are needed. A powerful web of creative thought – not a hierarchical organization, but rather an ecosystem of skills and knowledge – is growing around this project as it takes form. We have already engaged individuals in dozens of organizations spanning local government, non-profits, and social business. Due to the organic nature of the process, they are claiming niches where their expertise is a natural fit to the larger objectives we all share.

This collaboration network will be unified across time in quarterly planning sessions and an annual conference that highlights creative talents in our community and channels the enthusiasm created through the sharing process into “solution incubators.”

Quarterly Planning Sessions

Every three months, beginning later this spring, there will be one-day planning sessions to reinforce core values, identify emerging challenges, and coordinate community resources as opportunities emerge to drive the transition to sustainability.

These planning sessions will culminate in a yearly conference that showcases our accomplishments, reinforces community, and sets the tone for ongoing activities going into each new year.

The Annual Conference

One vital component of our innovation engine is a yearly conference that serves three vital purposes. First, it provides a location for convening discussions that highlight the work of our most creative and forward-looking citizens. Inspired by the famous TED Talks, the format of presentations and quality of presenters is intended to inspire new thinking and spread ideas far and wide. Secondly, it is a conduit for establishing cogent annual themes for strategic planning purposes. And thirdly, it is an organizing tool for building collaborative communities.

The conference structure includes two parts. The first part is a day of presentations designed to be inspirational and evocative. Emphasis is given to emerging solutions

and promising new practices with potential to be game changers. The second part is about harnessing the excitement that emerges around the first day's presentations to create a "solution space," facilitated by expert leaders from the collaboration network – along the lines of an architectural design charette where the group brainstorms specific ideas and solutions that need to be implemented in the coming year.

Participants also set ongoing agendas through a strategic planning process following the conference that identifies gaps in community resources, explores alternative future scenarios, and coordinates efforts across the region around emerging themes.

Ongoing Agenda Setting

The annual conference provides a mechanism for the collaboration network to set an agenda each year as events unfold and situations change. Each year's theme is selected to achieve far-reaching goals along the way to becoming carbon neutral by 2030. During the interim between conferences, the quarterly planning sessions ensure that we stay on trajectory as crises and opportunities arise intermittently that need to be addressed quickly and early on.

To ensure that each year's agenda matches the situation on the ground, a steering committee will be selected among leaders in local government, the non-profit sector, university research, business, and among the citizenry. The selection process will be open and transparent to the public. By leaders, we mean "change agents" who move beyond the status quo and embody the spirit of progress.

Create a Movement Map

In conjunction with the emergence of our collaboration network, an organizing tool will be created that maps out the key players in the region in the form of an action-oriented "movement" map. This map will contain a web of meaningful relationships among people in the network that allows us to quickly identify relevant expertise, funding sources for projects, people who fit into *persona categories* (such as connectors, influencers, builders, funders, etc.), and how these individuals map onto organizations throughout the region.

This map is currently being developed in conjunction with the Mayor's office through its emerging capacity to engage neighborhood leaders in organizing and outreach efforts. It will become part of the community's organizing tools for enhanced civic engagement and neighborhood leadership.¹⁵

Organizing and Outreach

Early development of our collaboration network has led to ties with the city government and a cadre of social businesses and non-profits seeking to establish capacity for participatory democracy. Our innovation engine is built on the

¹⁵ One inspiring example is the "empowerment map" for the city of London at <http://www.shapeyourcity.org.uk>.

scaffolding of these various efforts so that we contribute to and integrate with existing organizing and outreach efforts. As new social technologies and organizing tools come online, they will be integrated into our network to form links between neighborhoods, local organizations, and local government.

For example, Groundwire is developing software for civic engagement that maps out levels of enthusiasm as key attributes.¹⁶ Mayor McGinn created an open source communication platform to invite community members into dialogue during his transition into office.¹⁷ And Sustainable Seattle has created an information commons for sharing sustainability insights and techniques.¹⁸ Tools like these will be incorporated into our organizing and outreach efforts to promote further collaboration among partners.

Creating a Pressure Cooker

In conjunction with the annual conference, we recognize that there need to be “idea incubators” in place throughout the year that pressure us to innovate as we advance our agenda. By this we mean that there need to be creative spaces that promote parallel collaboration toward common goals. We will seek partnerships with existing incubators and seek to coordinate them around the shared vision of our creative community. This builds on existing activities like the brown bag lunches of Great City, the inspirational Ignite talks, gatherings like Green Drinks, and the lineup of speakers for Town Hall Seattle.

This pressure cooker of creativity will help stimulate ongoing innovations during the interim between conferences that feed quarterly planning sessions and keep momentum moving forward.

Sustained Movement Through Bold Leadership

We recognize that many movements are stalled by an organized opposition and the hesitancy of public officials to take risks once elected. Bold leadership is needed *within* the community itself. And public officials need to be held accountable when they fail to deliver what we demand.

Historically, there has been tension between the mayor’s office and city council. This tension has often led to stalled decisions and outcomes inconsistent with the desires of most citizens. The final element of our innovation engine is the creation of a *legitimizing environment* that allows bold leadership to emerge within the government – and has the power to hold those who don’t act boldly enough to account in a public forum.

One possible mechanism we could use to achieve public accountability is a legislative scorecard that measures legislative acts relative to our objectives for

¹⁶ <http://www.groundwire.org>

¹⁷ <http://www.ideasforseattle.org>

¹⁸ <http://www.b-sustainable.org>

becoming carbon neutral. We can build upon the scorecard developed by the Washington League of Conservation Voters.¹⁹ For example, any decision by the city that makes it more difficult for pedestrians to safely get around without an automobile would result in a low score. By contrast, clear plans for smart growth and walkability that reduce carbon emissions would move use toward our goal and result in a high score.

Currently no similar mechanism for public accountability exists at the city level. Because we intend to drive innovation through the *community itself*, it will be necessary to apply pressure on our elected officials so they follow our lead.

Bringing It All Together

The creative community of Seattle is organizing itself around a shared vision of the future. Now, we need to build an infrastructure of strong systems that will allow us to collaborate and drive innovation across two decades to achieve our goal of carbon neutral by 2030.

Thus: the Innovation Engine. Throughout the next several months we will refine and improve this model as we build it. During this time our network will continue to grow and our vision will become more clear.

You are welcome to join us in this important work. We are always on the lookout for good ideas and good company. Indeed, we'll need your help to build it! Please don't hesitate to let us know how you see yourself fitting into this interconnected web of activities. Now is the time to get involved.

People around the world are looking to us for leadership. We are sitting on a goldmine of talent and opportunity.

Let's get to work!

¹⁹ <http://www.wcvoters.org/scorecard/>