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Building A Sustainable City: The Rochester Energy Commission

In 2009 the Rochester City Council passed Ordinance 19A creating the Rochester Energy Commission (REC) charging it to take, “a leadership role in the creation of a sustainable energy future.” The ordinance also affirmed that Rochester views the creation of a sustainable Rochester energy future as part of a broad regional goal.

Furthermore, the ordinance states that there is a scientific consensus that greenhouse gases (GHG) from the burning of fossil fuels—which accounts for more than 80% of U.S. energy production—affects the Earth's climate, increasing the risk to people from increased extreme weather events, changing rainfall and crop productivity patterns, and migration of infectious diseases. Because of this, the City of Rochester will take a leadership role in increasing energy efficiency and reduction of emissions from municipal operations, and reducing energy usage throughout the community.

What are the Primary Tasks of the REC?

In general the REC is to take the lead to create a sustainable energy future by saving resources, developing greater energy independence, supporting and building the local economy, improving air quality and public health, and improving community livability.

The ways the REC will accomplish its tasks are:

1. Identify throughout the community the quantity of natural gas, electricity and water used, the amount of vehicle miles traveled, the amount of solid waste generated and the total amount of GHG released. (These are our benchmarks.)
2. Establish reduction goals for our GHG emissions and
3. Develop an Energy Action Plan (EAP) which will chart our path to reaching our reduction goals.

The REC accomplished No. 1 for both the city government (<https://mn.B3Benchmarking.com/Default.aspx>) as well as for the entire community (<http://RegionalIndicatorsmn.uli.org>).

It has met No. 2 by agreeing to follow Minnesota state GHG target goals. These are a reduction of 15% by 2015, 30% by 2025 and 80% by 2050. The benchmarks are based on 2008 figures. The nine-member Commission is working towards obtaining the funds necessary to begin work on No. 3, the actual Energy Action Plan.

What We Have Learned So Far

Rochester is part of an ongoing statewide, 22-city energy-related data collection effort called the Regional Indicator Initiative. We learned that based on 2012 data, the latest currently available, Rochester has the highest total energy use per capita. This is our combined residential and commercial usage. When looking deeper, our residential energy usage per capita and per household is the second highest of the 22 cities. Our Commercial energy use is second

highest per capita and third highest by number of jobs.

Rochester is also part of a database collection tool called B3. It exclusively focuses on Minnesota units of local government. Among its current findings, Rochester is ranked 215 out of 217 cities for our municipal building energy efficiency. This extremely low ranking means that there are huge opportunities for major cost-saving improvements.

Why an Energy Action Plan?

Cities across the state and nation have developed their own plans under various names. All of these plans identify the approaches that will lead to meeting their reduction goals; and so will ours. Our Plan will include proven best sustainability practices.

For maximum effectiveness, everyone in Rochester needs to be involved. This includes residents, businesses and government. "It's supposed to be creative," said Jill Mickelson who served on the REC during its infancy. "The EAP is not supposed to be a cookbook approach to reducing Greenhouse gases." Our EAP must be tailored to our community. Input will be sought from throughout the community on ways to meet our reduction goals and help create a sustainable Rochester.

Rochester has already taken steps to conserve energy and find renewable resources in its efforts to lower the city's GHG emissions. According to the Regional Indicators Initiative, from 2008 to 2011 the energy usage per household in Rochester dropped from 256 kilowatt-hours per day to 241 kilowatt-hours per day. That's nearly a 6% drop and means each household saved money and reduced its CO2 output. Unfortunately, in 2012 Rochester's per household usage jumped to 305 kilowatt-hours per day; its highest over this period.

Rochester already has found creative solutions such as energy-efficient street lights and traffic signals, the Waste-to-Energy facility that converts solid waste to electricity and heat, and the city's ultra-Green Transit Operation Center. "We're not just doing these things to look good," said Edward Cohen, chairman of the REC. "We're doing these because they make good financial sense and are in the best interests of our current and future residents."

While the city has made some strides, having an Energy Action Plan will ensure that Rochester focuses on the right steps to reduce our energy and water use, solid waste generation and to promote efforts that clean our air and reduce our car-dependency.

While the REC looks for funds to create the EAP, it will seek out and promote cost-effective steps and money saving opportunities. Think of these as "low-hanging fruit" just awaiting the picking now.

What Can You Do?

To meet the goals in 2015 and beyond, the REC wants to work with professionals and those with backgrounds in all fields touched by our work. It also seeks input from groups and individuals throughout the community who are concerned about creating a sustainable Rochester. Together, we will identify the most promising ideas and practices that will make this the sustainable Rochester we all want.

If this effort appeals to you, get in touch. People in action are the most powerful form of energy. Email us at RochesterEnergyCommission@gmail.com or call 328-7100. You can learn more by visiting our website at www.rochestermn.gov/EnergyCommission or follow us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/RochesterEnergyCommission and Twitter @RochesterEnergy