



CITY OF IOWA CITY  
UNESCO CITY OF LITERATURE

## Sustainability Report : 2015

Prepared by the  
City of Iowa City  
Office of  
Sustainability Services

*Spring 2016*

The City of Iowa City is committed to improving quality of life through sustainability practices by promoting social well-being, environmental health and economic stability. In the most recent strategic plan, the City Council's priority is to measure progress toward a more inclusive, just, sustainable Iowa City. This report summarizes our 2015 sustainability highlights, as well as initiatives that will be undertaken in 2016.

# What are the sustainability efforts Iowa City is working toward?

## Food Initiatives and Community Engagement



The Children's Discovery Garden at the Robert A. Lee Recreation Center promotes community engagement by teaching young people about foods, food production, and the environment, and by providing easy access to healthy foods. In 2016, local nonprofit Backyard Abundance will help establish a new community garden/edible outdoor classroom on the Rec Center's south side for all ages. See the back page for more info on Local Food Initiatives.



## Natural Environment

A monarch butterfly visits a garden in Iowa City. Read more about our Monarch Initiative for 2016 on the back page.

## Social Well-being

The Iowa City community gathers to view original art, listen to live music, and enjoy great food with family and friends at the annual Iowa Arts Festival.



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# City of Iowa City Sustainability Highlights : 2015



## STAR Community Rating System

In March 2015, the City of Iowa City joined the 2015 Spring Leadership Program, a one-year program designed to work through the STAR Community Rating System, which provides a framework for local communities to measure sustainability. There are seven goal areas: Built Environment, Climate & Energy, Education, Arts & Community, Equity & Empowerment, Health & Safety, Natural Systems and Innovation & Process. City staff collected data in each goal area for one year, and submitted it to STAR for review.

*Fast forward:* On March 9, 2016, Iowa City was awarded a 4-STAR Community Rating for sustainability excellence, earning a final score of 484.8, the highest-scored city in the State of Iowa. Other STAR-certified Iowa communities include Charles City, Dubuque, Davenport, and Des Moines. Iowa City is the 47th community nationwide to achieve certification from STAR communities. By receiving the STAR rating, Iowa City will receive national recognition for its achievements and commitment to sustainability.



*Left: 826 E. Davenport, before UniverCity renovations.*

*Below: After work was completed. The restoration earned a Historic Preservation Award.*



## Big Belly Trash Compactors

In October of 2015, Iowa City added four Big Belly systems in the Ped Mall in Downtown Iowa City. Each Big Belly contains a trash compactor and a recycling compactor, both of which are solar-powered. Compaction reduces the need to empty the containers as often, saving staff time and resources as well as reducing the number of trash cans required Downtown. There used to be 143 trash cans and three recycling bins Downtown, but since installing the Big Bellies, seven trash cans have been removed. The City hopes to add six more compactors in the Downtown area this year, thereby increasing the amount of recycling and reducing the number of trash cans required due to Big Belly's high visibility and easy access.



## UniverCity Neighborhood Partnership Program

In late 2015, the City's UniverCity Neighborhood Partnership Program celebrated the sale of 51 houses since January 2011. The UniverCity Neighborhood Partnership is an effort by the City of Iowa City to focus on neighborhoods located near the University campus that have a large renter population but that retain a single-family character and can help meet the demand for affordable single-family housing. UniverCity purchases these homes, renovates them using local contractors, and sells the houses to income-qualified applicants. Program goals are to preserve and build upon the unique character of residential neighborhoods adjacent to campus, ensure that UI neighborhoods remain vital, safe, affordable and attractive places to work and live, and finally, to encourage investment in these neighborhoods. UniverCity homes provide numerous benefits, including close proximity to schools, services, and employment. Additionally, the program provides a sense of community, reduces sprawl, and supports local economy.

## Blue Zones Project®

In February 2016, Iowa City was awarded Blue Zones Project community certification. The Blue Zones Project is a well-being initiative that seeks to make healthy choices easier through permanent changes to environment, policy and social networks. Commitment from local businesses, organizations, schools, community leaders, and volunteers allowed Iowa City to be named a certified Blue Zone Community in February 2016. "We are proud to have been able to create new policies and implement changes that contribute to a healthier city, but prouder still that the entire community has worked together to earn this Blue Zones certification," said then-City Manager Tom Markus. A Blue Zones Project that got underway in 2015 was the establishment of Creekside Neighborhood Garden. The local nonprofit organization Backyard Abundance, along with Creekside residents and the Iowa City Parks and Recreation Department, made the garden possible by planning and preparing beds for spring planting in 2016. Now, in addition to play and recreation, the park will provide a large variety of fresh produce for residents of the neighborhood.

## Equity

In 2015, Iowa City worked extensively on the Racial Equity and Diversity Initiative:

- Mandatory training for all full-time permanent City of Iowa City staff was held in October. The training examined and explored issues of diversity, privilege, oppression and leadership.
- In July 2015, Iowa City joined the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE), a national network of governments working to achieve racial equity and advance opportunities for all. Julie Nelson, Executive Director for GARE, visited Iowa City in November 2015 and conducted a half-day training for City Department Heads, Division Heads, and City Council members. The training was specifically geared toward upper management and elected officials, and included interactive exercises to deepen the understanding of racial equity and teach participants to begin to apply this learning experience to their work in government.
- City staff attended the conference "Equity in Sustainability" in Minneapolis, MN, to help discover ways to embed equity in government systems.
- Numerous other initiatives in the equity action plan continue, such as "Coffee with a Cop," the City Manager's Roundtable, and increased outreach to communities of color by actively participating in events, programs and outreach.

## Iowa Initiative for Sustainable Communities Partnership

The City of Iowa City continued its partnership in 2015 with Iowa Initiative for Sustainable Communities (IISC), which matches City projects with University of Iowa students and faculty to offer educational opportunities while furthering sustainability initiatives. Over the course of two academic years, 23 IISC projects have been undertaken.

Sophia Finster, a senior at the University of Iowa, has partnered with IISC in three classes and now is completing an Independent Study project for IISC. She says this partnership is unique because "IISC provides a connection to a community where the project is important to them." A project completed in Fall 2015 by UI student Cecilia Wolf analyzed Iowa City's expected annual savings once all streetlights have been converted to LEDs.



*LED streetlight on Kirkwood Avenue in Iowa City*

# City of Iowa City Sustainability Initiatives for 2016

## Compact of Mayors

In February 2016, Iowa City Mayor Jim Throgmorton signed the Compact of Mayors, the largest cooperative international effort among mayors and city officials to demonstrate their pledge to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and prepare for the impacts of climate change. Through the Compact, Iowa City will commit to reducing local greenhouse gas emissions, measuring community emissions, and setting data-based targets for the future. The City will also work to address the impacts of climate change, identify climate hazards, assess vulnerability, and commit to developing a climate adaptation plan. The Compact has four stages which will take place over three years. In addition, the City Council has allocated funds for a project that achieves a significant, measurable carbon emission reduction.



## Inclusionary Housing

This spring, Iowa City hopes to have an Inclusionary Affordable Housing ordinance considered by the Planning and Zoning Commission and City Council. This affordable housing requirement would be applicable only to future development in the Riverfront Crossings District in Iowa City. As proposed, the affordable housing requirement would give options to address housing affordability (such as owner-occupied housing, rental housing, and/or a fee to be deposited into an affordable housing fund), and would primarily affect multi-family buildings. Several City documents and studies support measures to increase the supply of affordable housing. An inclusionary housing component in the Riverfront Crossings District is one strategy to increase the supply of affordable housing and advance the goal of a mixed-income neighborhood.

## Riverfront Crossings Park

Final designs for the Riverfront Crossings Park will be solidified in 2016, moving toward the first phase of implementation, which will include restoring Ralston Creek and connecting it to newly constructed wetlands, with park amenities and trails that will allow visitors to understand, interact with and celebrate these natural features and processes. In future phases, other park amenities will be constructed, including improved access to the river for fishing, boating and wildlife viewing, new recreational features, such as a bouldering course and natural playscape, and public art that will celebrate Iowa City as a river town and a center for arts and culture within the region.

## Local Foods Initiative

Iowa City Parks and Recreation has been working to establish alternative methods of payment at the Farmers Market. When it gets underway in May, the Farmers Market will be more accessible than ever with the addition of a credit card and SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) payment program. Shoppers may bring their EBT (Electronic Benefit Transfer) and/or credit cards to a centralized information table and swipe their cards for tokens. All eligible vendors will accept the SNAP tokens, allowing increased access to fresh, locally produced, nourishing and safe foods and other products for all patrons, raised or produced by local labor. Another local foods initiative in collaboration with Johnson County will also take place in 2016. More details will be available once plans are in place.

## Iowa City Monarch Initiative

Several City staff members have joined together to create a Monarch Initiative. With the coordination of staff in several departments, plans are being made to allow Iowa City to become a more habitable environment for Monarch caterpillars and butterflies. To achieve this goal, a variety of public events centered around Monarch education will be held throughout the year. The events will also provide community members with the tools to support Monarchs within their own neighborhoods. Additional events are expected to be planned in the coming months.

## Street Trees

The City has plans to complete a street tree inventory, which will give staff information about the number of each tree species and their location. A street tree planting program is also underway as a response to the recent finding of the Emerald Ash Borer in Iowa City. Several species will be planted to replace the ash trees in order to increase biodiversity. The City also has completed a report assessing City-owned natural areas and plans to create a management strategy for those areas soon.

## CITY OF IOWA CITY SUSTAINABILITY SERVICES

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