**PUBAFR 6890 - Networking**

**Cathy Becker**

For this assignment, I went to the Environmental Professionals Network breakfast in January. The EPN is a monthly networking event held at the 4-H Center for the School of Environment and Natural Resources. Usually there are guest speakers on some kind of environmental issue, and people from both the professional environmental community and students at the school are encouraged to attend to meet each other and network.

January’s event was “[Climate Action: Our Local Response to a Global Challenge](https://epn.osu.edu/events/epn-breakfast-january-15-2019).” This was especially relevant for me because of my work leading the Ready for 100 campaign asking the city of Columbus to commit to 100% renewable energy. I actually knew most of the speakers already, some of them better than others. The four speakers were:

* William Murdock, executive director, Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission
* Jim Schimmer, director of economic development and planning for Franklin County
* Alana R. Shockey, assistant director for sustainability for the City of Columbus
* Jordan Davis, director of Smart Columbus at the Columbus Partnership

Murdock opened with a look at regional perspectives on sustainability, including the [insight2050](http://www.morpc.org/program-service/insight2050/) initiative that talks about what we can expect for Central Ohio in the next 30 years and how we can manage it. Basically we are looking at adding 1 million people to the region at the same time as we want to bring down carbon emissions, so that will be a major challenge.

Schimmer discussed sustainability efforts on the county level, including the recent [Franklin County Energy Study](http://www.morpc.org/program-service/energy-studies-and-technical-assistance/), which found that six neighborhoods in Columbus have unacceptably high energy burdens, almost 100% of money spent on energy flows out of the county, and two-thirds of energy used here is wasted due to inefficiency. The study recommends building 1 gigawatt of solar energy generation in the county, among other things.

Alana Shockey, who we have met with several times for the Ready for 100 campaign, discussed climate action on the city level. That included both the recent [Columbus Climate Adaptation Plan](https://byrd.osu.edu/columbus), the writing of which was led by Byrd Polar Research Center, and some very exciting plans for mitigation of carbon emissions in Columbus. The city is winner of the Bloomberg Climate Challenge Grant, and has hired a renewable energy manager and will get a climate advisor.

Finally, Jordan Davis provided some updates about the [Smart Columbus](https://www.columbus.gov/smartcity/) program, funded by a grant from the Department of Transportation. As part of that program, Columbus is educating people about buying electric vehicles, installing more charging stations, and working on mobility solutions such as Bus Rapid Transit to get people out of single-occupancy vehicles.

The presentations were fantastic, and I was really glad to hear Alana talk about the recent report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change stating that we must cut carbon emissions in half by 2030 and to zero by 2050 if we want to have an inhabitable planet. Jim Schimmer also referenced climate change in his talk – clearly local officials are taking this problem seriously and want to do their part. Cities are where 75% of carbon emissions happen, and Columbus is the 14th largest city in the country, so we have a significant role to play in addressing climate change.

But even better than the presentations themselves was the networking. After the event, several environmental leaders in Columbus gathered in a meeting room to discuss initiatives in our different groups. The conversation went for about an hour and was useful and informative.

Participants in the discussion besides me included:

* Terry Hermsen, professor at Otterbein and leader of [Central Ohio Community Project](http://www.otterbein.edu/News/2018/01/17/otterbein-faculty-lead-central-ohio-discussion-on-climate-change-at-working-summit), which is looking at how to connect climate action across the broader region
* Mark Neal, an attorney who volunteers at the Columbus Foundation
* Mac Crawford, a retired professor of public health who volunteers with Clintonville Energy Collaborative
* David Celebrezze, who manages the Columbus [GreenSpot](https://www.columbus.gov/greenspot/) program
* Claus Eckert, coordinator for Green Columbus which runs the city’s annual [Earth Day](http://www.earthdaycolumbus.org/) (really Earth Month) festivities
* Jason Cervenec, outreach and education director at Byrd Polar
* Chuck Lynd, board member for Simply Living, a sustainability group in Columbus
* Michael Holm and Sheila Fox, co-chairs of Citizens Climate Lobby Columbus

We started off with a general discussion that touched on a lot of different things – the fact that Columbus has the fastest-growing urban heat island in the country, how green infrastructure can be used to address this, and what the insight2050 report says about future growth. Planting trees and installing rain gardens can reduce not just temperature but also stormwater runoff and air pollution such as ozone levels, which in turn reduces asthma and improves public health. However, the city tried installing rain gardens in Clintonville, and residents balked.

We also talked about conservation vs efficiency. Efficiency might mean you drive an EV instead of a gas car to work, so you lower carbon emissions. But EVs charged on fossil fuels, while still better than gas cars, are not carbon free. Conservation means you carpool or find another way to work, so you save the carbon emissions from a single occupancy vehicle entirely. But that will require changes in behavior across an entire population, which isn’t easy to implement.

The GreenSpot program encourages behavioral change by designating households, businesses, or even entire neighborhoods as a GreenSpot if they do certain things to conserve energy and water. The program has 17,000 members, which seems like a lot, but it’s less than 2% of the city. However, it’s possible to increase environmentally conscious behavior. In Columbus in 2014 only 5% of people recycled, but now that is up to 75% because it’s now easier for people to do.

We also talked about what a Green New Deal in Ohio might look like. Chuck challenged the conventional wisdom of MORPC that the population of Central Ohio will increase by 1 million people by 2050. He thinks we need to rebuild the economies in rural towns and small cities to create jobs there so that people will not continue to stream into Columbus.

Terry wants to see Columbus reach out to surrounding cities and counties to incorporate the entire region into climate planning. Transportation is a big issue. People from Delaware County have to drive on large interstates to get into Columbus because there is no regional rail network. Mike mentioned that there’s no recycling in Canal Winchester because the city council there thinks it is too expensive. So the question is how to fund these initiatives.

For that, Chuck advocates a public banking system such as exists in Los Angeles. Locally we have a Columbus Franklin County Finance Authority, which has funded some large renewable energy and energy efficiency projects, and could possibly act as a public bank.

Claus said Green Columbus wants to grow its Earth Day project sites to 20,000 locations, and welcomed coordination with other groups and in other locations besides the city of Columbus.

Jason talked about the lack of broadband in rural areas of the state, which makes it harder for people in those areas to participate in statewide initiatives. He also said MORPC is the obvious vehicle to drive the conversation about regional coordinator.

On transportation, Jason said that Toronto city officials told him their biggest mistake was not preserving corridors for mass transit such as a place to put a rail system. Columbus is the largest city in the country with no rail service whatsoever, and once you lose those corridors, they are next to impossible to get back. Toronto has roads with 18 lanes of traffic that go nowhere.

Claus echoed the need for rail transit, saying that in no city in the world can you get people who make above a certain threshold of income to ride the bus, but that they will take subways and trains. But David said Columbus is not looking at light rail because once the tracks are laid, it is impossible to change the route, whereas Bus Rapid Transit is more flexible.

Transit will be a critical issue for Columbus moving forward, and I am in the camp that supports rail. If we really are getting 1 million more people into Central Ohio, there is no place to put 1 million more cars on the roads. Traffic here is already very bad, and I just don’t see masses of people riding the bus or biking to work. We might be able to get some to carpool, but in general the traffic situation here is going to get even worse. Friends in Los Angeles have told me the rail system there immediately relieved traffic pressures, and if the current administration in Columbus refuses to look at a rail system, a future administration will have to.

Another topic that came up is agriculture. We discussed the possibility of urban farms as well as regenerative agriculture in rural areas. Jason mentioned [Ohio Smart Agriculture](https://www.ohiosmartag.net) as a way to bridge the divide. Farmers are realizing the need for diversity and carbon sequestration, but also finding that it saves money. Who wants to pay for fertilizer that runs off into the nearest stream?

Finally we talked about how to continue the conversation across a lot of different environmental groups in the region. Cincinnati has a network group called [Green Umbrella](https://www.greenumbrella.org/) that facilitates collaboration among over 200 area non-profits, businesses, educational institutions and governmental entities focused on the environmental aspects of sustainability. We could model a regional group in Central Ohio on this.

Central Ohio does have a start for a coordinating group like this – through the Sustainable Columbus External Stakeholders Advisory Board (which I am on) and the GreenSpot Advisory Board as well as the Ohio Sustainable Roundtable. Ohio Environmental Council might be a centering agency, and Simply Living has a lot of members in Transition Central Ohio.

Perhaps after I finish my degree, I will see what I can do to put together a proposal for all these groups to start a Green Umbrella in Central Ohio. In the meantime, hopefully this group will get together again to continue the conversation.