
Growing a greener Evanston

Activists are looking to Portland, Ore., for tips on everything from energy policy to food

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The mayor rides his bike to work, many of the buildings are "green friendly," and the city has been voted cleanest and most walkable in America.

Portland, Ore., has long been ahead of the curve on environmental issues, and Evanston's green activists have taken notice. They are looking to the Pacific Northwest city for pointers on how to make Evanston a greener place to live.

They hope to glean advice on everything from Portland's innovative energy policies to its local food production during a seminar April 2 to celebrate Earth Month. The seminar will feature a speaker from Portland's Office of Sustainable Development.

"They're one of the leaders in [environmental] sustainability," said Sue Carlson, leader of a group called Evanston's Affordable Housing Future, which is participating in the event. "We want [to learn] how Portland got to where they are now."

The event is sponsored by the Network for Evanston's Future, a grass-roots consortium that includes six groups of volunteers working to create green policies that they hope the city will adopt. The event, which will be held at the Unitarian Church of Evanston, is free and open to the public.

Some Evanston officials said they would be open to ideas.

"The folks who are involved in creating a sustainable Evanston are right," said Ald. Steven Bernstein. "We have to save the planet. It should start here in Evanston."

Debbie Hillman, leader of the Food Policy Council, another group involved in the event, said she has been eyeing Portland's initiative to turn food waste collected from restaurants and groceries into compost rather than dumping it into landfills.

Hillman said her group also has taken note of Portland's plans for urban farms and hopes Evanston might be able to follow suit with a 2- to 3-acre farm inside the city limits. The farms are environmentally friendly because they tend to support organic produce, she said.

"Our goal is to put food on the radar as a policy issue," Hillman said.

Carlson said her group is working to pass a city ordinance that would require "inclusionary" housing--meaning housing that includes low-income units--and that she hopes to hear how such initiatives have succeeded in Portland.

Building environmentally friendly housing keeps costs down, she said.

"What makes it affordable is to have well-insulated housing, well-lighted, good efficiency on a furnace, a whole range of issues that make it a green home," Carlson said.

Another group in the network, Evanston's Energy Future, has been working on city building codes that would require commercial buildings to conform to environmentally friendly standards, said Len Sciarra, one of the group's members.

"I want to have a sustainable city--I want to be green," Sciarra said.

"The energy code is one little piece of the overall picture."

Stephanie Swanson, spokeswoman at Portland's Office of Sustainable Development, said Portland has been working on green initiatives for more than a decade. In 1993, city leaders tackled global warming by creating an action plan that would "meet or beat" the 1997 Kyoto Protocol on greenhouse gas emissions, Swanson said.

The city created more than 150 strategies to reduce energy consumption, reduce waste through recycling, build green buildings and implement alternative transportation, Swanson said.

In the 1970s, the city implemented measures to stop suburban sprawl and is now negotiating a deal to fuel all city government buildings with renewable wind energy, she said.

Today, about 10,000 people ride their bikes to work in Portland, including Mayor Tom Potter, who also sometimes drives a hybrid vehicle, Swanson said.

The initiatives have thrust Portland into the limelight and into print in publications such as Bicycling Magazine, which recently voted Portland the best biking city in North America.

They are initiatives Evanston's environmental community hopes the city will emulate.

"We need to figure out how communities can address the upcoming and already current shortages we have in resources," Carlson said. "Can we sustain not our current lifestyle, but can we sustain a good lifestyle in the face of shortages?"
