

Recommendations

Regional Environmental Planning for Sustainability

The following recommendations are presented for consideration and adoption by the Centralina Board of Delegates for use in:

- Guiding the work of the organization in terms of business practices and work program elements
- Policy-making related to both organization programs and policies and recommendations to the membership

1. Think of SEQL not as a program but as a way of doing business.

The SEQL “project” as a partially-EPA-funded undertaking is ending. However, the concepts underlying SEQL have long-term value and should be used as guiding principles for regional and local decision-making, and in fact are incorporated in the core values uncovered by the CONNECT visioning project. These include:

- Wise use of and protection of natural resources, so that they are not “used up” but able to recover after use, is a key element contributing to the region’s quality of life. In other words, sustainable practices regarding the environment are essential if we wish to maintain the region’s natural beauty and restore the health of our air and water.
- Integrated planning is an important element of wholistically growing a “healthy region.” We recognize that the natural and built environment impact upon each other, in terms of land use, transportation, air quality, water quality, energy consumption, and also human health. We further recognize that the region’s economic health is dependent on maintaining a proper balance across these sectors.
- Explicit support of both environmental principles and integrated planning as direction for government, business, and civic activity is important, as is stakeholder involvement. The explicit support notifies all parties of the leadership’s intent to pursue this approach, and the stakeholder involvement helps to minimize unintended consequences.

2. Continue action item adoption and implementation.

Centralina and Catawba Regional staff should continue to promote specific actions that contribute to better planning practices, greater environmental

sustainability, and integration of planning across sectors. Funding for staff development should include an element of promulgating “lessons learned” to all member governments and other stakeholders. Whether this takes the form of full SEQL-esque “action items” or shorter information, it is important that new learnings and best practices be:

- Widely disseminated
- Simply worded
- Related to integration—what are the shared benefits that derive from a practice? How does it relate to other aspects of government or business operation?
- Frequently distributed.

It is also important that staff continue to work with local governments, either on a cost-reimbursement or grant-funded basis, to provide technical assistance with action implementation or education.

Because of the need to demonstrate attainment of the 8-hour ozone standard in a relatively rapid time frame, it is important that Air Quality be allowed to “drive” action focus until short and long term attainment of all relevant air quality standards is assured. It is also important that in undertaking actions that are designed to improve air quality, these actions do not negatively impact water quality. Finally, it is important to focus on both short-term impact actions, and those for which the impact is long-term, such as land use/transportation integration.

3. Promote integrated planning through a tool box approach and imbedding specific actions and integration tools into public policy.

The importance of integrated planning is clear in the area of land use and transportation policies—walkable communities depend on certain types of land use as well as transportation infrastructure, just as large-lot subdivisions require certain characteristics in a transportation network. Integrated planning can be relevant in issues as divergent as school siting and watershed protection.

SEQL has promoted integrated planning through several tools:

- Local “integrated planning roundtables” in which planners from diverse disciplines in local government (schools, law enforcement, public works, transportation and land use) meet to discuss upcoming issues and projects, and work to maximize benefits and prevent unintended consequences across sectors and neighboring jurisdictions. Gaston County’s G-CAMP is a good example of this.

- The “Web of Integration” brainstorming process, which looks at likely and potential impacts of action issues. It is a useful first step in identifying potential partners and stakeholders, across sectors, in addressing public issues or concerns. Ordinance and procedure changes that provide for integrated review of major developments and/or notification of neighboring jurisdictions of changes, such as is included in the NC 73 Council of Planning and the Mountain Island Lake Memorandum of Understanding. Many communities also call for cross-sectorally-integrated “technical committees” to review major developments. Ordinance and procedure changes that make it possible to fast-track the more sustainable development forms that support public policy. This is important because in development, time is money, and fast-tracking provides a way for local governments to incentivize desired development forms without additional cost to the local government. Adoption of specific policy statements and subsequent planning documents that address the community’s intent to support environmental sustainability and integrated planning. Examples of such documents are the City of Charlotte’s Environmental Policy, and the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Planning Commission’s Draft Environmental General Development Policies are a good example of this.

Such tools and approaches strengthen environmental planning and the integration of planning across sectors by making it “the way business is done,” rather than an add-on. In most cases, this can be done within the framework of local government operations, without any special legislation, and simply through direction by the governing body. Where language is needed to amend ordinances, regional staff can provide assistance, and a stakeholder process is recommended. **Continue CONNECT, the Regional Visioning Process.**

SEQL was action-oriented, as well as promoting the integration of land use, transportation, and environmental planning. However, in order to lay a long-term policy basis for sustainability, and to provide a regional framework for addressing regional issues, a more formalize process for building and implementing consensus is needed. CONNECT provides this process.

Because it will be based on the discovery of commonly-held values, the regional vision that emerges from CONNECT should provide a solid basis for regional cooperation for years to come. The critical next steps of CONNECT include asking all communities to expand on the shared values, discuss how they own those values, and how that translates into

relationships with surrounding communities and the region as a whole. Communities are encouraged to actively participate in CONNECT.

5. Implement a Regional Environmental Forum.

SEQL has shown that there are two ways to respond to environmental concerns—to “do what the regulations say,” and to positively act to improve the situation. Doing what is required, is required, but may not be sufficient to actually address the problem in the long term. Furthermore, it is often far less expensive and easier to address an issue before it becomes a problem. Finally, since budgets are limited, as is time, it makes great sense to do those things that most effectively advance multiple purposes.

One way to provide the region with input as to emerging issues, proactive approaches, “early action plans,” and to build consensus, is to use existing regional expertise. SEQL proposes creation of a forum that brings together environmental leadership to fulfill these purposes. Such a body could provide valuable information and advice to the Centralina and Catawba Regional COGs and their members, and could also be a valuable group of supporters in seeking grants and funding for environmentally-friendly actions our jurisdictions have already adopted but need funding to implement.

6. Pursue a legislative agenda that provides grant funds for environmental project implementation and adequate funding for regional environmental planning.

The legislative goals adopted by the North Carolina Joint Regional Forum support the provision of funding for regional water resource planning and project implementation, and funding for regional air quality projects. Additional funding sources should be identified to provide funding to support regional open space planning in conjunction with State efforts, as well as emerging issues planning.

7. Continue to monitor action implementation and track measurable progress on an annual basis.

Staff should continue to work to produce an annual “report card” on integrated planning and action item implementation, as well as to track those actions which produce quantifiable results. Such a report card would help to recognize successful projects, provide information about activities that are most effective, and also stimulate continued good works.