Sustain Dane's Sustainability Snapshot Prototype

Sustainability Snapshot FAQ

Why did Sustain Dane start this?

The Sustain Dane Board of Directors asked, "What is sustainability? How sustainable is Madison today? Where do we want to be tomorrow?" By measuring indicators of sustainability, this innovative tool will work to answer these questions in a collaborative and inclusive way. It will illustrate the unexpected, interdependent connections within our community, economy, and environment. The Sustainability Snapshot not only helps us understand where we are today, but it also informs and inspires actions toward a more sustainable future – together.

Who is this for?

The Sustainability Snapshot is for everyone in our community. We are hoping to reach an audience that goes beyond those who already consider themselves sustainability champions to include two other parties: those who work in one of our indicators but aren't familiar with Big 'S' Sustainability, and those who are familiar with Big 'S' Sustainability but aren't working in one of the fields. We hope to encourage action on both the individual and organizational levels.

Talk about your process.

We started with a lot of questions – about what sustainability means, how we're doing, and where we should go. We knew we couldn't answer these questions alone. We collaborated with big picture thinkers from across the community. We gained input from one-on-one meetings with individuals from different neighborhoods and sectors. We learned with students in the Edgewood College Sustainability Leadership Program, and we tested many prototype designs. Then we launched this prototype at the annual Badger Bioneers Conference on November 10, 2016 to connect innovators and change-makers with a new tool for measurement, connection, and inspiration. With your input, this project will keep growing.

So if you're not actually gathering data, what are you doing?

We're bringing this data together into one place. We're connecting the dots between issues in our community, economy, and environment. We're showing that you can't sustain one indicator without sustaining them all. We're capturing stories about collaborative projects that work. We're measuring our state of sustainability so that we can build on our "bright spots" and determine our priorities as a community. We're illustrating that Big 'S' Sustainability belongs to all of us, connects all of us, and is up to all of us.

How did you decide which indicators to use?

We aspired to be as collaborative as possible and align with existing sustainability indices. We undertook an iterative process, during which we examined a number of indicators and consulted with a variety of specialists to choose the ones we felt would best fit the Madison region and provide a concise but representative snapshot of local Big 'S' Sustainability. We strove to pick leading indicators, indicators already being measured, and indicators local organizations are following.

What do you mean by a "leading indicator?"

Leading indicators are proactive rather than reactive. They are used to predict outcomes and trends.

What about indicators that aren't being measured, like happiness?

This tool aims to strike a balance between being comprehensive and comprehensible. We know there are dozens of other indicators we could have used and worked our best to collaboratively choose indicators. We narrowed down the data from a broad range of considered indicators, selecting data that seemed to best represent Madison regional sustainability. We aren't creating or measuring new data, so we're just pulling data from already existing sources. So, while there are some indicators we would like to capture in the Snapshot, that data may not exist yet.

This tool is designed to evolve with community interests. For example, if our community sees happiness as an important indicator, than we would be happy (hah, get it?!) to add it. We also found that there were external and internal contributors to well-being that were already being measured (see Happy City Index Bristol Pilot).

What is the quality of the data?

We pulled our data from reputable national, state, and local sources that measure data not just for Madison, but for other regions as well. You can find all of our sources here. This process ensures the potential for comparing locales. Find details about specific indicator data on each indicator page.

What is the geographic and time scope of the data?

Every indicator is slightly different, but we did our best to keep it relevant and consistent. The time period and the region that specific data reflects are listed on each individual indicator page. In general, we tried to get the most recent time period available. Our philosophy was to take the smallest data region available, stopping at 'Madison City Proper' (i.e., not going down to zip code or census tract level).

What's the deal with the trends and thresholds?

Determining our trends and thresholds is still a work in progress. We hope to engage the community in these areas as the project moves forward. Currently, the trends reflect how the indicator is doing in regard to its own historical data. Simply, is the indicator doing better or worse than in the last several years? The threshold is an area where we particularly must garner more community input. The threshold is meant to function like a goal, a cut-off point, a standard for where we hope to be in the near future. As it stands, the thresholds have been determined by examining historical and regional data to find benchmarks that hold us up to our own historical standards, other mid-size cities, and national averages.

What about "X Organization's" contribution to this indicator?

We would love to recognize the work that every organization is doing for each indicator. But because that information is too difficult to track accurately, we instead highlight stories of innovation and collaboration that emphasize the work happening within the interconnections between indicators.

Is this done?

Nope. We're still working out the kinks. We're listening to community members to determine what information is relevant, how this tool should function, and what this site should look like. We're finding new perspectives and new nuances to the data. We are creating new channels of interaction so this tool can reach its full potential. We hope to update the data yearly or bi-yearly and will continue to review the selected indicators to ensure they are still relevant as the city changes. We are continually seeking new stories and community input to help this tool grow and evolve.

Where do I fit in?

When it comes to Big 'S' Sustainability, we are all stakeholders. We all have the opportunity to become change-makers, to work together as sustainability champions to create a more sustainable future within our unique spheres of influence. Which indicators affect you, your family, and your community? Which indicators do you care about? How can you help move us toward a vision of Big 'S' Sustainability in your home, your neighborhood, your school, and your workplace? How can you work with others to make a bigger impact? The Sustainability Snapshot will help you identify your impacts, your goals, and your partners in this journey toward a strong community, a just economy, and a healthy planet.

How is this funded, and how can I support it?

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