

Urban Sustainability Innovator Profile: Jennifer Green

Jennifer Green, sustainability coordinator for Burlington, Vermont, has just gotten off the phone with a half-dozen other USDN members, a mid-September call to develop their next meeting about “smart parking.”

It's the latest step in a year-long process that included development of a successful proposal to the USDN Innovation Fund, a convening of 11 USDN cities in Burlington, intense engagement with her city's downtown business community, a webinar for USDN members about what was learned at the convening, development of a “next steps” proposal for the Innovation Fund (also successful) and now starting that project to help participating cities design and implement public-private parking agreements.

Why smart parking? Green says, “In Burlington's climate action plan, one goal is to build a vibrant downtown core that supports density. A challenge we have is underutilized parking lots. We have a lot of people who commute into town for work, but we need to do a better job of using our parking spaces instead of building new ones. It affects density.” Green connected with her city's economic development team, which was focused on attracting new businesses to downtown, and leaders in the city's parking system, who understood the legal, financial, economic, and technological opportunities and challenges of streamlining the system. Recognizing that everyone needed to get smarter about how to address the challenges, she connected with other USDN members and submitted a proposal for funding to convene and learn from experts and peers about “progressive ways that cities are dealing with parking.” The group contracted with a consultant to provide an overview at the convening. But Green also timed the meeting so that she could invite the local business association and other city officials to the session.

After the convening, a half-dozen USDN members—*Burlington, Cambridge, Oak Park IL, San Antonio, Santa Monica, and Tucson*—decided to take a next step together. “We wanted to turn our learning into something concrete.” They focused on how cities could increase use of underutilized parking lots by developing agreements with private owners (banks, churches, etc.) and helping private owners collaborate with each other. Green offers the example of a church across the street from a hotel that needs parking. “The church may only need the lot on Sundays and weekday evenings. How can a city facilitate an agreement to let the hotel use the lot too?” Supported by the next-phase Innovation Fund grant, each city has committed to meet and then initiate efforts to develop public-private parking agreements.

Green says that coming from a smaller city—population 42,000—has been an asset for innovating. “In a small city, you know your colleagues. I know what they are facing as a challenge. It's easy for me to say, ‘What are you working on and how can I help?’” For smart parking, she worked closely with Nathan Wildfire, assistant director of economic development. “I could go right to Nate and say, ‘I know you're interested in smart parking as an economic development tool. Shall we work on this together?’ You know your colleagues and can draw them in.”

And, she says, working on an innovation project with other USDN cities has benefits beyond the actual project. The smart parking group was comprised of parking specialists within the cities, not the sustainability directors. “They see themselves as a team. They liked getting down and dirty on one topic with their peers. Through USDN, sustainability directors have opportunities to see each other and build relationships. In this project, we facilitated that for parking specialists.”