

The Power of Collaboration

Fort Collins' Jackie Kozak-Thiel Discusses the Importance of Peer Exchange in a Culture-Change Field

From the state to local level, Jackie discusses the challenges of being the face of 80% reduction by 2030 goals for a city, and what having access to peer networks means to her



Q. You supervise Fort Collins' Sustainability Services division, formed in 2012 to bring the departments of economic health, social sustainability and environmental services under one roof. It essentially combines the 3 pillars of sustainability. What has your experience been like since taking over this department?

A. I'm the second person to hold this role. It was set up very well, organized around the triple bottom line (TBL) principles. We have a diverse and demanding portfolio of responsibilities. While my predecessor was passing the vision to the next generation (me!) to operationalize it, he said something that stood out to me. He said he had wanted to engage more with USDN but did not have the time. I came from the state level and had looked at the USDN network model with great interest. I was excited to meet my peers when I moved to the local level. It is hard to balance immediate demands, but learning with my peers is so important to me.

I oversee the homelessness issues in Fort Collins, too. It is interesting as to what all falls under the sustainability umbrella in various cities. For me, it's been a matter of making sure I'm filling the immediate needs as best I can. I have the privilege of being the dot connector. I set and span boundaries on behalf of my team. Sustainability is owned by everyone, and everyone has a role in it. There are areas of focus, though, and setting boundaries of focused prioritization is imperative. It is about being cognizant enough to understand what we can and cannot influence.

Having an amazing team is also helpful. Also, support from CNCA and USDN is vital. Sustainability directors must know that their work is a marathon, and treat it as such. It is about taking crises in stride, but also about trusting in what history shows us: that breakthroughs do happen, and we facilitate the conditions for them to happen. It can also be really scary on the leading edge with the responsibility of helping our community to meet Fort Collins' ambitious goals. But, I am overjoyed to work on something so meaningful in a community that I love, and get to be part of the larger global conversation.

Q. What is rising to the top for you in terms of priorities?

A. I'm a little over 2 years into my position in Fort Collins. My ultimate priority is to actualize full integration of each pillar of sustainability into city operations, and I need to make sure they are all equally strong. I'm trying to make sure all are adequately resourced, and we are of course focused on climate. We're still in our early processes to clearly establish strategies, priorities, and common metrics. Sustainability as a global practice came out of the environmental movement. More recently, economic development aspects have been inspiring sustainability leadership.

Social equity is an emerging area of focus for sustainability, and we have a long way to go with it. Homelessness, housing, inclusion and diversity, resilience and workforce are examples of intersectional priorities that are vital for the economic, social and environmental health of the whole community. It ultimately comes down to affordability. A correlation between being ranked a "greenest" city and having challenges with affordability is concerning to me. What can we do about this? How do we meet sustainability goals while insuring that people can still afford to live, work and play in our cities?

The Power of Collaboration

Q. You chair the USDN Common Metrics Committee. What is your approach to quantifying the impacts of a network, when so much of what makes it work are the intangibles of peer exchange, relationships, and collaboration?

A. I've led common metrics processes for other organizations. It can be muddy waters. It is not just standardizing data and processes. It is about establishing what matters. There are a lot of folks new to USDN, and we have a lot of emerging areas of expertise to collectively address, like increasing competence in social equity. How do we also reduce reporting burden for cities and leverage, align, and build upon the great work done by STAR and others?

Regarding common metrics for USDN, we are starting to see a path ahead, and will present that to members at the USDN Annual Meeting in October. We are coordinating with USDN's High Impact Areas (HIPs) Committee, and we will both discuss our findings in San Diego. We've established a matrix, and we are trying to tie objectives to aggregate data to show impact of USDN member actions. For instance, if we are discussing climate change mitigation, maybe we can show total greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) reduced by the work of USDN cities and what percentage of the U.S. inventory we can influence. We can then make the tie to how USDN has supported this impact.

Q. You went to Sydney and Melbourne this year to attend the Carbon Neutral Cities Alliance (CNCA) Annual Meeting. How did this trip come about for you?

A. When they hired me here in Fort Collins, international engagement was something they were excited for me to do. Local context is so important, but you have to think with great interconnection to other places. What I committed to when I took this job was to think globally while acting locally. Our city actions add up to meet state, federal and international goals.

If we have the community support, the resources, and an innovative clean energy economy, then we also have a responsibility to be part of the global conversation. Climate change impacts and innovative solutions have no boundaries. It is a balancing of the need to learn and the need to share with other cities. It is an import/export process. Networks like CNCA and USDN help this sharing process.

Q. What are your key takeaways from the CNCA Annual Meeting?

A. We joined several grant proposals. That is a win-win: proposing CNCA cities are excited by Fort Collins' interest, and my team and fellow department heads are excited about being involved in the possibilities these ideas present.

The immediate action item is our communications piece. We have an integration team made up of staff from our 3 sustainability departments. One of the things we talk about frequently is capacity building for the types of work we do. So, when I got back from the CNCA Annual Meeting, we hired a person to teach us about influencing change at our annual retreat. There is a continual need to equip people in this role in cities with the skills to be transformative leaders and to catalyze systemic change.

Q. What is your impression of USDN so far, now that you are a member?

A. I love USDN! The partnerships we have with the philanthropic community are awesome. I think about this from the common metrics perspective, too. Continuing support from the funders is based on our shared understanding of the intangible benefits of a network. The personal and collaborative connections that came out of the CNCA meeting? This really matters. Networking like this gives us access to practical solutions to try at home, a common language, and a peer support.