

## Water Innovator Profile

### Erick Shambarger (Milwaukee, WI) talks about being a Water Centric City and managing water resources in sustainable and resilient ways.

*Because Milwaukee is built on water, a strong cross-sector collaboration around sustainable water management has emerged. Milwaukee's Erick Shambarger discusses leading by example on urban water issues.*

Q1. Milwaukee is calling themselves a [Water Centric City](#). What does that mean?

A1. Water is fundamental to life in our economy, and we're trying to integrate it into everything we do to create a sense of place for Milwaukee. We have 3 rivers and a Great Lake, but still water isn't always the first thing people think of when they hear about Milwaukee. We are leveraging all sorts of partners to program around water and raise community awareness.

We have a [School of Freshwater Sciences at the University of WI, Milwaukee](#). We have the Water Council's [Global Water Center](#). We are in the [United Nations Global Compact Cities Programme](#), and water is our key focus. Mayor Barrett is actively engaged in the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Cities Initiative.

Water has many facets, yet it is often a second thought and under-discussed in sustainability offices. Clean drinking water is essential for life and industry, yet we rarely talk about sustainable water sourcing. Clean water bodies attract people and real estate investment. They support fish and aquatic life. During extreme storm events made more common by climate change, water can threaten people and property. To thrive, cities need to manage all elements of water. The Water Centric City initiative identifies nine principles for water centric cities:

- Water Leadership
- A Gathering Place by The Water
- Water Technology
- Applied Water Research and Policy
- Green Infrastructure and Climate Adaption
- Fishable, Swimmable Rivers and Water Bodies
- Sustainable Water Supply
- Healthy Drinking Water
- Onsite Water Reuse

These principles are consistent with the [International Water Association's Water-Wise Cities](#) seventeen principles, which Milwaukee has also endorsed.



*Image Source: Milwaukee City Website*

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Q2. You run the City of Milwaukee’s Environmental Collaboration Office (ECO). Water Centric City program is just one facet of this office’s duties. What local partners help you execute Water Centric City programming?

A2. We are leanly staffed as an office, but “collaboration” is literally our middle name. We are directly partnering with the School of Freshwater Sciences, and we accept interns from this program. That’s one example of how a partner is supporting us. Sustainability Directors are wearing many hats, and we can tap the intern populations our colleges provide to help us be effective. Instead of turning students away, I try to place them. I meet with everyone once a week, and overall this approach has helped to expand our office reach. Managing partnerships is a big part of our daily work load. They are the key to our successes.



*Image Source:  
Milwaukee City  
Website*

Q3. You believe water is one of the defining sustainability issues of the 21st century. You are considering building partnerships among cities who are aligned on this belief, and who want to work on spreading green infrastructure best practices, water harvesting and reuse, water technology, and sustainable water supply. How do you envision this type of collaboration playing out? What would it look like?

A3. In the short term, we could consider starting a USDN Peer Learning Group. Later, if this is successful and we identify work we want to collaboratively do together, we could consider reaching out to other like-minded networks. We have a lot of good existing networks, like the [Compact of Mayors](#), so I’m not sold that a new network just for this is needed.

When I first took this position, I was thinking a lot about energy. As I’ve gotten deeper into the sustainability space, my eyes have opened to what we as Sustainability Directors could and should be doing around water. Cities have influenced energy conservation and renewable energy sourcing, even though they may not directly control energy utility decisions. Why can’t we do the same kinds of things with our water systems, working closely with our water utilities?

Water doesn’t acknowledge jurisdictions. It spans across them. Cities can play a much larger role in coordinating best sustainable water practices.

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Q4. What advice do you have for communities who want to emulate this program?

A4. Create a brand and a web presence to show leadership around local water issues. It inspires all interested parties to become more collaborative. It makes the city the hub, the clearinghouse, the primary point of contact. Connect the water work to economic drivers and innovative technology. Tell the story as cutting edge collaboration around one of the biggest resource issues of our time. And, go for grants.

We are fortunate that we have a business community that is very responsive to water as an economic driver. Having someone at the city who says they will connect the dots around local water issues has opened more and more opportunities. Before, there was no central place to tell the water story. Now, the city is driving the conversations.

Our local philanthropies got involved, too. "[Take me to the River](#)" is a Partners for Places project that we are currently implementing. It focuses on designing our harbor district, which our Sustainability plan calls for. The project features a design charrette to get people physically down to the river. This work has inspired a new [public plaza](#) in the harbor area. So we are finding ways to connect people to water and water into our civic identity. I'd look forward to continuing the conversation with sustainability officers from around the country.