

Urban Sustainability Innovator Profile: Jill Simmons

When Seattle adopted an ordinance in 2010 to require building owners to provide the city with data about their buildings' energy use, it turned the program's enforcement over to one of its departments.

But that didn't work, says Jill Simmons, the city's sustainability director, because the new program needed "space to grow and innovate."

The program was shifted to the Seattle Office of Sustainability and Environment (OSE), which Simmons directs. "We're more like an R&D shop. We had the flexibility to go after grant funding, to test things in ways that typical city functions can't do as well. Being in close alignment with the Mayor's office and the Council allows us to try things. It's important to have a place in city government to try out new things."

Although Seattle's Energy Benchmarking Program achieved a 99% compliance rate by 2013, Simmons adds, "that doesn't mean it's done innovating. I believe the program is ready to move beyond helping building owners to comply with reporting requirements. Next, it can focus on identifying the best ways to use those reports and the data they provide to drive energy efficiency in the non-residential and multi-family building sectors." She notes that OSE is partnering with Seattle City Light and the city's Department of Planning and Development to analyze the building energy data in an effort to help target the incentives for energy efficiency to low-performing buildings. The analysis will also inform the planning department's 2015 update of the Seattle Energy Code.

Simmons has helped to lead USDN efforts to explore mandatory building energy benchmarking and how such efforts can lead to increased energy efficiency. She has participated in discussions and projects and took the lead in designing and facilitating a "breakthrough convening" on the topic in 2014, funded by the USDN Innovation Fund. Working with other cities, she says, has been beneficial to Seattle in several ways.

"We've learned from them. For example, our structure for fines was terrible. New York City and San Francisco have used a simpler structure that could work for us. Having regular contact with other cities has helped us to learn from each other's mistakes and successes. I cannot overstate how helpful it's been to rely on peers."

"It has helped on building local political will. Being able to point to New York City and San Francisco, for instance, makes a difference. There's a spirit of competition that helps to push us further."

"It also helps to be able to do collective problem solving. We're all struggling with benchmarking—with the volume of data, how to analyze it and use it cost effectively, with how to talk with building owners. But instead of each of us having to figure this out by ourselves, the sharing among us is very efficient and powerful."

For now, the benchmarking program remains in Simmons' office. "It's still with us and will be for a while. We're using it as the foundation for thinking about what the next generation of energy efficiency policies will be. It provides us with a baseline on building energy performance and the opportunity to analyze the data for trends and energy-efficiency potential. It also provides an annual opportunity to talk with building owners about energy performance and to connect them to incentives and financing." During the next few years, she adds, "I expect Seattle's program will evolve to have less emphasis on reporting compliance and a stronger emphasis on helping building owners understand their buildings' energy performance and take action to improve it. The program really is our innovation laboratory."

Recently, Jill announced that she will be leaving her position in May after working for the city for 10 years.