

Background Research Report

Reimagining a Sustainable Business Program

In collaboration with local businesses, the City of Fort Collins and Sustainable Living Association are partnering to reimagine a new sustainable business program. Based on the 20-year old ClimateWise program that ended in 2020, the new program will aim to engage a greater spectrum of organizations and businesses. In the face of a rapidly changing climate and world, the new program will focus on resilience to ensure that local businesses have the resources and ability to thrive in the long haul. Local needs and available resources will influence the new program's structure, with special attention paid to racial equity and inclusion. Engaging businesses of various sizes and sectors, the new program will draw upon leading green business programs throughout the country. This report provides information regarding ClimateWise's history, previous evaluations and recommendations, and research regarding other programs. As a result, this report offers the Leadership Team and Steering Committee essential context and background information, creating a strong foundation from which to begin the reimagining process.



I. History of ClimateWise

ClimateWise began in 2000 after the City adopted its first Climate Action Plan, which identified the private sector as one of the main contributors to greenhouse gas emissions (GHG). The program developed over the years and was housed in different City departments throughout its tenure. Still, it always focused on providing local businesses with the information and opportunities to help them and the community achieve their sustainability goals.

ClimateWise was launched as a voluntary GHG reduction program for businesses, with cross-departmental teams of City employees providing holistic assessments in waste, energy, water, and transportation. These assessments informed Customized Action Plans to help businesses reduce their emissions. The Brendle Group, a local environmental consulting agency, verified the impact of actions detailed in Customized Action Plans and the combined impact of the program overall. In exchange for their environmental efforts, businesses received public recognition and access to rebate incentives. ClimateWise participants formed an extensive network for peer exchange, collaboration, and resource sharing. Throughout its first decade of operation, 4-6 dedicated employees and a substantial City budget enabled ClimateWise to introduce sustainability consulting and objectives to the larger Fort Collins community.

Later, because of the 2009 financial crisis and associated funding shortages, ClimateWise assessments became the sole responsibility of the Utilities Department rather than being the result of cross-City collaboration. Because of Utilities' focus on energy and water, the City outsourced transportation and waste assessments to relevant experts, creating a decentralized and fragmented assessment process. Additionally, ClimateWise did not have specific program objectives or formal documents outlining expectations, check-ins, or other organizational structures, resulting in a difficult transition period between departments.

In 2015, a more inclusive ClimateWise 2.0 program launched with simplified reporting requirements and a voluntary reporting structure. These changes reduced the need for Brendle Group verification of impact and associated costs. Additionally, ClimateWise 2.0 evolved to incorporate a broader range of actionable items and ways for businesses to participate, expanding to include social metrics. As a result of this restructuring, ClimateWise allowed companies to choose from a suite of sustainability options that provided more and different opportunities for collecting points toward membership levels. These actions aimed to increase the diversity of businesses involved in ClimateWise; however, business participation decreased by 10%. This is likely because of reduced staffing and poor communication with companies regarding program changes. Additionally, the expanded assortment of ClimateWise activities, especially socially-focused ones, meant that 2.0 metrics could not be used in evaluating the City's progress toward its larger climate goals.



II. Performance & Program Evaluation

In 2019, as the ClimateWise program diverged significantly from where it started in 1999, the City's Performance & Program Evaluation (P&PE) program conducted a comprehensive evaluation of ClimateWise from its infancy to the present day. The P&PE program provided several recommendations to enhance ClimateWise's effectiveness and impact in future program iterations. While these recommendations are valuable in the reimagining process, they are most relevant for a City-owned and operated program. Because the new sustainable business program will eventually be led by a local organization or non-profit, rather than the City, the following P&PE recommendations have been adjusted to ensure relevance to and consistency with the new ownership model.

1. Develop core documentation outlining:
 - Program mission and objectives
 - Program-specific associated resources, including budget, full-time employees, etc.
 - Operational expectations, including short & long-term deliverables, etc.
 - Tracking and reporting mechanisms
2. Develop a governance structure that reflects how the success of the new sustainable business program depends on collaboration and regular communication among the Sustainable Living Association, City of Fort Collins, business owners, and other stakeholders.
3. Develop concrete and measurable metrics and tracking mechanisms to meaningfully contribute to the City's overall climate goals (See following section: **III. Our Climate Future**)
4. Develop policies around communication when changes are made to the program



III. Our Climate Future

A recommendation from the City's P&PE evaluation includes aligning the goals of the sustainable business program with city-wide sustainability goals, allowing for consistency in program tracking

and effectiveness. The City recently adopted [Our Climate Future](#), a comprehensive plan which seeks community-centered approaches to achieve Fort Collins' climate, energy, and waste goals. We aim to align these goals (listed below) and the new sustainable business program where possible.

- Achieve carbon neutral status by 2050
- Provide 100% renewable electricity by 2030 with grid and local sources
- Achieve zero waste, or 100% landfill diversion, by 2030
- [Our Climate Future Big Moves](#)

IV. Our Climate Future Business Findings

During the development of Our Climate Future, the City sought input from local business owners regarding business priorities, barriers to sustainability, and the City's role in enhancing sustainability. Incorporating these findings into the sustainable business program is vital to ensure alignment among all parties. The results are as follows:

1. Business priorities (percent of respondents)
 - Energy efficiency and clean energy (28%)
 - Achieving a profit and economic growth (26%)
 - Waste reduction and diversion (24%)
2. Barriers to sustainability
 - Cost, including the cost of improvements, low ROI, lack of incentives, lack of access to capital, lack of capacity (70%)
 - Lack of buy-in from employees, company, stockholders, community (31%)
 - Lack of knowledge or access to resources re sustainable operation (23%)
3. City's role in enhancing sustainability
 - Provide networking, partnership, and collaboration opportunities (39%)
 - Education and outreach to the public (37%)
 - Financial support via rebates, incentives, tax credits, grants (34%)

V. Sustainable Business Program Research

As we begin to reimagine Fort Collins' sustainable business program, we look to such programs across Colorado and nationwide to identify common structures, best practices, and unique approaches. While we anticipate that Fort Collins' program will be distinct from any of the researched programs, the examples provided show the diversity of models for such a program. We hope to inspire and encourage brainstorming and creative thinking throughout this process, with leading cities serving as examples.

In our research, we found that most programs adhere to one or more of the following **standard approaches**:

1. Overseeing body provides a list of sustainability actions for businesses to complete

2. Overseeing body provides free energy & waste assessments to businesses to determine areas for improvement in sustainability
3. Rebates and grants are available to businesses to implement sustainability actions
4. Businesses complete a certain amount of actions (pre-determined by overseeing body) for certification
5. Certified businesses receive recognition as a green business

From these basic approaches, we see various iterations and **program models** across the country:

- *Industry-specific approach – [Denver, CO example](#)*
 - Businesses of different sectors (Automotive, Brewery, Events, Office/Retail, Print Shops, Restaurant) have distinct activity option lists
 - Each industry has specific actions that are mandatory for certification
 - Pros:
 - Allows the program to tailor sustainability actions to specific environmental implications of each sector
 - Doesn't hold all sectors to the same standards, which may be unrealistic or irrelevant to all sectors
 - Cons:
 - Requires specific knowledge regarding environmental impacts of each sector
- *Tiered approach – [Summit County, CO example](#)*
 - Point values are associated with each sustainability action. Gold, Silver, Bronze, and Certified levels of certification correspond to different point totals
 - Different certification levels receive varying marketing/PR incentives
 - All certified businesses receive social media posts and are included on Green Business Directory
 - Benefits accumulate as certification level increases, including monthly newsletter shout-outs and advertisements in local news sources
 - Pros:
 - Provides incentives for businesses to continuously improve their sustainability efforts
 - Promotes friendly competition and camaraderie among businesses
 - Cons:
 - Requires consistent updates to social media and other marketing platforms, as well as annual assessments for all businesses
- *Program-area certifications – [Boulder, CO example](#)*
 - Instead of awarding one overall certification which covers all program areas (Energy, Waste, Water, Transportation), businesses receive certifications in individual program areas
 - Pros:
 - Allows businesses to tackle one program area at a time
 - Allows more companies to get involved in the green business program since certifications do not require holistic action
 - Cons:

- Non-holistic approach to sustainability could result in less proactive efforts towards sustainability

We also identified a variety of **best practices**, which we plan to consider throughout Fort Collins' reimagining process:

- All services, resources, and webpages available in Spanish
- Details of the green business program are easy to find on relevant website(s)
- Directory or map of certified green businesses in the City
- Communications toolkit provided to certified companies to help them effectively spread the word about their sustainable practices
- Grant programs available to implement sustainable activities, especially for [minority](#) and [small business](#) owners
- [Efficiency Works Program](#) provides rebates to commercial customers of Fort Collins Utilities for projects that enhance energy efficiency

The following programs throughout the country are paving the way in sustainability by filling gaps and utilizing **unique approaches**. We hope these inspire and motivate us throughout the creation of Fort Collins' sustainable business program:

- The [City of Los Angeles's Green Business Ambassador Program](#) allows interested community members to recruit local business owners and spread the word about the sustainable business program to the local community
- The [City of Golden's Sustainability Awards](#) allow residents to nominate community members who are leading the way to a more sustainable future
- The [State of Massachusetts' program](#) includes criteria for local purchasing and local food sourcing

VI. Next Steps

Given the information presented in this Background Research Report, the newly formed Leadership Team will meet monthly beginning July 27 2-3:30pm to brainstorm, innovate, and discuss Fort Collins' future sustainable business program. The team members and their affiliations are detailed here:

Kellie Falbo | Sustainable Living Association, *Executive Director*

Jensen Morgan | City of Fort Collins, *Climate Action and Community Engagement*

Wendy Serour | City of Fort Collins, *Utilities*

Zahra Al-Saloom | Sustainable Living Association, *Sustainable Business Program Assistant*

Gabrielle Fuerst | Sustainable Living Association, *Sustainable Business Program Fellow*

Kevin Jones | Fort Collins Area Chamber of Commerce,

Jacob Sanchez | HP, *Global Sustainability Program Manager*

Becca Walkinshaw | Republic Services, *Municipal Liaison*

Queen | Queen's Legacy Foundation, *Founder and Director*

Other members to be announced