

Business Engagement 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 (SBP). Based on the 20-year old ClimateWise program that ended in 2019, the new program will aim to engage a greater spectrum of organizations and businesses in climate action. 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, inclusion, and building a culture of belonging. Engaging businesses of various sizes and sectors, the new program will draw upon leading green business programs throughout the country. This report details where we are in the process, the work conducted thus far, and the outcomes of the initial Business Engagement phase of the reimagining process.

Key Takeaways

- **Alignment with Our Climate Future (OCF) goals** – As an extension of the City's OCF efforts, the new SBP's targets and goals must align with the City's overall OCF goals, which will be reflected as we build out the new SBP.
- **Best practices for an equitable program** – Through interviews with other equitable SBPs, we have started to incorporate tactics to ensure an inclusive and accessible reimagining process, including intentional recruitment of diverse stakeholders across the Fort Collins community, and an iterative, community-centered approach to program creation. Additionally, we are working to improve language access of future program materials and resources.
- **Program vision** – Our teams created a set of Core Values & Beliefs, Purpose Statement, and Mission to form the SBP's overall vision framework, which will guide us in creating the SBP pilot in 2022.
- **Program elements** – Through research of SBPs across the nation and local business outreach, our teams identified essential components of our future SBP, including: Funding, Ongoing Business Engagement, Education & Mentorship, and Tracking & Recognition, which will each be fleshed out as we build the program in 2022.
- **Funding needs & role of the City** – With the future SBP likely being a partnership between the City and a community organization, it is unclear how the full SBP will be funded and what the role of the City will be as a supporting funding mechanism, in addition to grants and other financial support. This will be clarified as soon as possible.
- **Business resource compilation** – As we identified funding and access to knowledge as major barriers to business sustainability, our team has begun compiling a library of rebates, incentives, educational resources, and funding opportunities to provide participants of the new SBP with tools to help remove barriers and promote business sustainability.
- **Next steps** – In 2022, our teams will conduct extensive business engagement to build out the program for its pilot phase, which spans from April to August 2022. During this time, we will also collaborate with our partners at Auburn University to conduct a robust barrier analysis of the previous ClimateWise program. We will then evaluate the pilot phase and incorporate findings into the full-fledged program, rolling out in early 2023.

Overview of the Initial Business Engagement Phase

The purpose of this business engagement phase was to gain insight from local business owners regarding what they want in a new sustainable business program and to begin building out a program prototype. Additionally, we wanted to understand the challenges that local business owners face, their priorities in terms of sustainability, and their barriers to sustainability. The entire reimagining process spans from June 2021 to August 2022 and is split into four main phases, as outlined below.



This timeline is a rough outline of the projected phases of the project, but it is worth pointing out that our team plans to conduct business engagement throughout March 2022, up until the launch of the pilot. This is an intentional shift in our creative approach, as we realize that it is important to continuously seek and incorporate feedback to fit business needs and priorities. Confining business engagement to only one step in the process limits the project's ability to respond to feedback. Additionally, instead of hosting a single visioning workshop to review business engagement as originally anticipated, we plan to host several mini-visioning workshops and build relationships with businesses in one-on-one conversations. This allows us to gain continuous program feedback as we iterate and adjust our program model as well as build trust with local businesses.

The work conducted thus far included interviews with SBP coordinators in other communities to understand best practices in creating an equitable sustainable business program. Here, we highlight Longmont's Sustainable Business Program, one of the strongest examples of an equitable sustainable business program we've found, led by Berenice Garcia-Tellez. Berenice provided specific recommendations for ensuring we reach local minority populations:

- Ensure all program materials, events, and resources are accessible in Spanish.
- First build trust with minority-owned businesses, rather than initially focusing on environmental goals. Bring them resources to help with their bottom line, as many businesses will buy into the program after they see that it truly aims to serve them, not just community environmental goals.
- It is important to have diverse, multicultural, and multilingual folks in higher-up, decision-making roles within the program.

- Provide mini-grants for businesses to fund small improvements such as LED lights, power strips, high efficiency toilets, etc.
- Connect businesses to each other for peer mentor support

We acknowledge that we are not yet where we would like to be based on these recommendations, but as we continue to build the new SBP, we will keep these recommendations at the forefront of the creation process and strive to ensure that the program serves all members of the Fort Collins community.

Establishment of Leadership Team & Steering Committee



Leadership Team

Heavily involved in co-creation
Early stages of sustainable business program development
 Provides **strategic direction** for program design
Meets twice per month



Steering Committee

Reviews and provides feedback on program design and other materials generated by the Leadership Team
Conducts outreach to other businesses in the community
Gauges interest and reactions from other local businesses and community at large
Meets once per month (with Leadership Team)

At the beginning of the Business Engagement phase, the Core Team, made up of individuals from SLA and the City of Fort Collins, recruited members to form two teams – the Leadership Team (LT) and Steering Committee (SC). These teams provide strategic direction and insight as we co-create the new SBP, allowing for various levels of involvement based on individual capacity and time constraints. Their distinct functions are outlined in the accompanying diagram. To ensure diverse representation from all segments of the Fort Collins community, the Core Team was intentional about recruiting LT

and SC members from various sized businesses, industries, ethnicities, races, and other identities. The members of the 2021 LT and SC are as follows:

Leadership Team

Kellie Falbo | *Sustainable Living Association, Executive Director*
 Jensen Morgan | *CoFC Climate Action & Community Engagement*
 Wendy Serour | *CoFC Utilities*
 Gabrielle Fuerst | *Sustainable Living Association*
 Alaina Hawley | *Platte River Power Authority*
 Becca Walkinshaw | *Republic Services*
 Erika Saucedo | *Las Catrinas*
 Heidi Pruess | *Larimer County ClimateSmart Program*
 Jacob Sanchez | *HP*
 Jose Luis Ramos | *CoFC Economic Health Office*
 Kevin Jones | *Fort Collins Chamber of Commerce*
 Pat Keys | *CSU School of Global Environmental Sustainability*
 Queen | *Queen's Legacy Foundation*
 Rahshida Perez | *June Poppies Bakery*
 Sam Aun | *Asiana Foods*

Steering Committee

Amelia Den Boer | *PetDine*
 Dawn Paepke | *Kaiser Permanente*
 Diana Hutchinson | *Trebuchet Group*
 Hannah Baltz-Smith | *Downtown Development Authority*
 Jean Runion | *Front Range Community College*
 Kirk Longstein | *City of Fort Collins & Larimer County*
 Reilly Boyt | *Leaping Lizard Labels*
 Trudy Trim bath | *Poudre School District*
 Zac Swank | *Boulder County Partners for a Clean Environment*

Vision Creation

To build an equitable program that meets the needs of our community members, it was essential to first establish a guiding light for the program through an overall vision framework. Using the vision, the team can now build out program prototypes of key program components. The newly established vision framework includes the group's Core Values & Beliefs, Purpose Statement, and Mission. It is worth noting that these are to be used for the pilot, but they are not necessarily set in stone for the entire duration of the program. As we gain insights on program efficacy throughout the Visioning Workshop and Pilot phases, these may be modified before launching the finalized program in 2023.

Core Values and Beliefs

1. We are seen as an essential resource to business success and community vitality, incorporating metrics beyond environmental sustainability to include social and economic aspects.
2. We believe that businesses should have a hub of resources to provide support through transitions, mentorship, and policy awareness, both at a local and federal level.
3. We are a program that acknowledges and respects the busy lives of business owners by being accessible and easy for all to participate, regardless of race, ethnicity, and other identities.
4. We believe Fort Collins can be a leader in determining, communicating, and accomplishing sustainability goals which have a rippling effect across the state.
5. We believe businesses have the best insight into how the program should be designed, led, and managed.
6. We believe sustainability-focused businesses should be meaningfully recognized in a way that adds value to their business.
7. We believe that tackling climate change at a City-wide level is a collective effort, requiring us to secure business buy-in and leverage community resources.
8. We believe this program should attract sustainability-minded consumers to give businesses a competitive advantage.
9. We believe in creating an intentional business community where businesses mentor, motivate, and learn together.
10. We believe businesses should have access to funding opportunities to achieve their sustainability priorities.

Purpose Statement

To inspire, connect, and support all Fort Collins businesses in taking equitable climate action.

Mission

To be the essential hub in empowering Fort Collins businesses to climate action.

Initial Business Outreach

In our initial business outreach for the SBP, Leadership Team and Steering Committee members interviewed a total of 30 businesses to determine the priorities, barriers, and the perceived role of

the City in a SBP. As displayed in the accompanying charts, respondents represent a wide variety of industries and identities, which refer to both personal identity and business identity.



Respondents indicated the following priorities, barriers, and roles of the future SBP, which are consistent with findings from other Our Climate Future outreach phases:

Priorities

- Increase energy efficiency & clean energy usage
- Enhance economic growth & profit
- Reduce & divert waste
- Educate employees regarding sustainability efforts
- Engage a larger percentage of BIPOC & underrepresented business owners
- Engage *all* businesses, especially small ones without major resources

Barriers

- Cost; lack of capital & capacity
- Lack of buy-in internally & externally
- Lack of knowledge & access to resources
- Businesses and employees don't understand the connection between small actions and big impact, how their actions contribute to the larger climate goals

Role of the City & SBP

- City should provide/enhance support systems that enable businesses to increase sustainability efforts
- Bring creative/innovative ideas to the sustainability space
- Provide networking & partnership opportunities
- Facilitate information sharing from other successful organizations
- Connect with sustainable suppliers
- Provide businesses with education & outreach
- Provide financial support
- Communicate business sustainability to consumers
- Provide recognition to participating businesses

Elements of a Sustainable Business Program

After establishing the group's overall vision, we identified the most essential components of a sustainable business program. Through brainstorming exercises with the Leadership Team and Steering Committee, we identified these as the most important elements of our future sustainable business program, as well as important ideas that each of these components should aim to incorporate, based on business feedback and group brainstorming:

- **Funding**
 - This category refers to funding for the program as a whole to operate, as well as funding for individual businesses to implement sustainable projects. As our groups continue to identify exactly how program funding will look, here are some main ideas to be kept at the center of the conversation:
 - To be truly sustainable, the program should aim to have its own revenue stream
 - Big businesses can be leveraged to sponsor smaller businesses or to offer overall program funding
 - Funding for individual businesses should be distributed equitably, such as through grants for underrepresented business owners
- **Ongoing Business Engagement**
 - This category refers to how the program effectively recruits new businesses into the program, as well as how we keep businesses engaged in the long-term as they complete their sustainability goals. Here are some main ideas that came out of our initial conversations with Leadership Team and Steering Committee members:
 - We want to facilitate and promote genuine relationship building with businesses, creating a strong network
 - We aim to keep people engaged year after year, incentivizing them to work towards their next step
 - We must be responsive to business needs
- **Tracking & Recognition**
 - This category refers to how individual businesses track their progress, what metrics should be tracked and indicate progress, and how businesses are recognized for their efforts. Some key ideas that resulted from conversations with Leadership Team and Steering Committee members regarding this category include:
 - Utilize data that already is being tracked (e.g., water/energy usage) and pre-existing tracking platforms, such as the CDPHE's Green Biz Tracker
 - Automate tracking where possible to alleviate the burden on businesses
 - Create a clear feedback loop between the business's performance through the tracker and the resulting recognition
- **Education & Mentorship**
 - This category seeks to address not only the content of sustainability resources that are provided to businesses but also how to ensure that businesses receive resources relevant to their experience level in sustainability.
 - Additionally, throughout our business engagement, we have heard that businesses find the most useful information to come directly from other businesses. As a result,

we believe a mentorship approach would be a great asset of the new SBP. Some additional ideas brought up by our LT and SC include:

- To ensure each business is getting relevant resources for their size, experience level, etc., an initial survey could help us gauge where incoming businesses stand
- We can connect businesses to existing materials to avoid duplicating work
- The format of education should differ based on business capacity

[Compilation of Business Resources](#)

Through our business outreach, we learned that businesses lack access to financing for sustainable improvements. Without a financial incentive, many businesses are not compelled to implement sustainable business practices. As a result, our team is compiling a library of resources for businesses to tap into local, state, and federal incentives, rebates, and funding for sustainability improvements, thereby proving their financial return and viability. This library builds on the research of other state and local SBPs, using their approaches as a starting point, and will be continuously updated as we learn of new resources. We plan to launch this resource library with the pilot in 2022, allowing us to utilize these rebates and incentives in the pilot and following iterations of the SBP.

[Next Steps: Going into 2022](#)

As we enter the Visioning Workshop phase in 2022, we plan to conduct more business outreach and develop a concrete understanding of how each of these four program components will work and how they interact with each other. Based on feedback from members, our LT and SC will merge into one larger LT, where each member will participate on one of four smaller Task Groups for Funding, Ongoing Business Engagement, Tracking & Recognition, and Education & Mentorship. Each headed by a member of the Core Team, these Task Groups will be responsible for fleshing out their respective program components and conducting business engagement as needed. Potential approaches for business engagement in 2022 include seeking input on rough prototypes in business focus groups, one-on-one sessions, surveys, and emails.

Excitingly, we were awarded a grant from the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to conduct an in-depth barrier analysis with Auburn University. This project will explore and elucidate potential and actual barriers associated with ClimateWise business and non-profit participation, providing a framework for subsequent recruitment efforts. As a result, this will enhance the new SBP's outreach and recruitment to underrepresented groups.

We plan to launch the pilot in April 2022, with 5-10 businesses acting as our inaugural cohort to test the program's functionality, accessibility, and effectiveness. Based on feedback from this cohort, we plan to adjust the program as needed and incorporate edits into the final program, to be launched in 2023. It is important to note that the newly formed program in 2023 will be owned by a community organization and partner as opposed to the City. We will closely engage with the community throughout the reimagining process and pass it off to a trusted partner. While the Sustainable Living Association is thrilled to be leading the reimagining process, funding questions

prevent us from knowing whether SLA will be able to commit to continuing the fully functional program. The working scope for 2022 is as follows:

1. Develop structure for pilot program
2. Identify and implement business engagement strategies
3. Iteratively test program prototypes
4. Conduct barrier analysis with partners from Auburn University
5. Finalize program branding
6. Implement pilot
7. Evaluate pilot
8. Determine how to fully stand up the program in 2023