

## Paint the Town Green

Written by

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When the City of Rock Island created its “Green Team” last year, one thing it did was initiate an in-house recycling program.

Yes, the City of Rock Island - which likes to consider itself progressive - had no recycling program within city buildings.

Some recycling was done, said Tim Ridder, assistant to the public works director, the city's environmental-services coordinator, and the staff person who leads Green Team efforts. “It just wasn't uniform throughout the city,” he said, and it wasn't being collected as a function of city government.

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This isn't offered as proof that Rock Island is out-of-step. Rather, it shows how far the Quad Cities have come in the past year. Environmental initiatives range from obvious little things to multi-million-dollar projects, and it's evident that municipal government has gone green.

Rock Island, Ridder said, is doing a department-by-department review of environmental practices. "We're doing it in public works, operation by operation," he said. "Businesses have been using it for years. If anything, municipal government is a little behind the times when it comes to environmental management."

Most cities are replacing incandescent bulbs with compact fluorescents, and most are installing occupancy sensors that turn off the lights when nobody's using restrooms and conference rooms.

Beyond that, here's a sampling of what's going on in the Quad Cities:

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- Later this month, Moline will begin its curbside-recycling program for all residents. Rock Island's subscription service is slated to begin in late April, and East Moline is expected to survey its residents soon about the possibility of curbside recycling.

- Rock Island this spring plans to purchase and expand a hydroelectric plant that could provide 65 percent of the electricity needs of municipal government.

- Several cities have begun replacing traditional traffic signals with energy-efficient LED versions.

- Rock Island is considering banning leaf burning.

- Moline, Rock Island, and Davenport mayors signed on to the U.S. Mayors Climate Protection Agreement, which includes reducing greenhouse-gas emissions to pre-1990 levels.

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- Rock Island and Davenport have purchased significant numbers of hybrid vehicles.
  
- Davenport's new police headquarters is a Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design building with a green roof. Rock Island is financially supporting redevelopment of the McKesson building downtown, which will also feature a green roof and other environmentally friendly features.
  
- Nearly half of the 215 motorized vehicles in Moline's fleet use B20 biodiesel, and this year the city plans to increase the number of flex-fuel vehicles from 28 to 52, said city Fleet Manager J.D. Schulte. The city also has a bid out to have on-site E85 refueling and plans to purchase its first three hybrid vehicles this year.
  
- Davenport is applying for the prestigious ICMA Community Sustainability award, and its application highlights a handful of energy-saving measures, from replacing energy-hog vehicles to revised transit routes that have increased public-transportation ridership by 24 percent.
  
- And although MetroLINK is not a municipal government, nearly half of its fleet runs on compressed natural gas, which burns more cleanly than other fuels.

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Several of these initiatives are arguably long overdue - curbside recycling in Illinois, and the possibility of eliminating leaf-burning in Rock Island - but there's a refreshing amount of green grandstanding in the Quad Cities, and there's significant substance behind it.

Davenport City Administrator Craig Malin said the impetus is sustainability, and environmentally friendly practices are a key component of that.

Basic economics play a role, too.

"Any time we do a project, we're looking at the payback," Ridder said.  
"We're reducing our costs."

### Payback

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One reason for an interest in green government is that it's cheaper - if you take the long view.

In some cases, greener purchases pay immediate dividends. For instance, the City of Rock Island has purchased three Ford Escape Hybrids, and the amortization and fuel costs are lower in year one - and every year thereafter - than the non-hybrid Escape. Over the anticipated 10-year life of the vehicle, the hybrid is roughly \$4,500 cheaper to own and operate after federal and state tax incentives, according to a city analysis.

More frequently, though, cities are operating on the premise of "payback" - that many environmentally friendly purchases or initiatives might cost more up-front, but will pay for themselves or save money in the long run.

Rock Island's planned purchase of the Sears Powerhouse from the White Hydroelectric Company and its subsequent expansion is expected to cost \$2.1 million, but the expense will be bonded. In its first three years, the city projects the facility to cost more (in combined operation and amortization) than purchasing the electricity from MidAmerican Energy. After that, however, the city expects that the total costs of the powerhouse will be cheaper than purchasing the electricity. The benefit jumps after the 20th year to roughly \$150,000 a year.

In the case of both automobiles and electricity, the city's analysis is based on assumptions of energy costs. For example, the city's vehicle analysis assumes gasoline prices of \$4.15 a

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gallon in 2012, and \$5.29 a gallon in 2017.

If those numbers end up being accurate, then Rock Island's purchase of 21 hybrid Honda Civics is actually a negligible money-loser. With its fuel assumptions, a hybrid Civic would be \$388 more expensive to own and operate over 10 years than a Ford Focus.

But, Ridder said, if those gasoline-cost estimates turn out to be low, the hybrid Civic would likely come out ahead. Overall, Rock Island's hybrid fleet is expected to save the city approximately \$5,500 over 10 years - which doesn't even take into account the environmental benefit.

Other times, green is simply more expensive. Like many cities, Rock Island chose to purchase recycled paper products - at an additional cost of \$500 per year. In that case, Ridder said, the environmental benefit offsets the higher expense: "We said, 'That's well worth it.'"

One challenge of being environmentally sensitive in a political environment is instilling in elected officials long-term thinking. Some environmental projects won't pay themselves off by the next budget or election cycle.

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Ridder gave the example of replacing the windows in City Hall. It's not cheap, he admitted, but the building could last another 50 years or more. "They pay back in 10 years, [and] you've got 40 years of making money on the deal," he said. "You're not instantly going to make money on a deal. Long term, you're almost always going to."

That's been an easy sell to this city council, Ridder said. The council chose green initiatives as its top priority for 2008 - higher than redeveloping the current site of Casino Rock Island. "This is their number-one priority," he said.

Bettendorf isn't exactly blazing trails environmentally, but it's doing things, too. "We're probably not as out front as other places," admitted City Administrator Decker Ploehn. "We're not putting our heads in the sand, either."

The city has \$250,000 in its budget for energy-efficiency improvements to City Hall and the police department, and an energy audit reports that nearly all the improvements will pay for themselves - in terms of energy costs or productivity - within 12 years. Improvements range from occupancy-sensor lighting control to improvements to heating and air-conditioning systems.

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Ploehn also said the city is exploring solar- and wind-energy options when it's doing major construction projects. Right now, he said, the city's looking to incorporate one of those at its maintenance center. "We don't know if there's a payback there or not," he said. "We're investigating that right now. ... As buildings become ready for upgrades - particularly roof and rooftop opportunities, and/or HVAC - we're looking at what those opportunities present to us, both from an energy-efficiency and from a green perspective."

He also said that the city will explore buying propane- or biodiesel-fueled vehicles when it replaces its buses. "That discussion hasn't occurred yet," he said.

"I don't think you should increase your costs arbitrarily just for the purpose of being environmentally friendly," he said.

### A Team Effort

Making purchases of environmentally friendly products is one way to be green, but it's often an attitude.

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In Normal, Illinois, a "Green Team" was formed early last year, and it was the inspiration for Rock Island's initiative. According to Normal team member Geoff Fruin, assistant to the city manager, the team's first year was largely spent "changing workplace habits."

Ridder echoed that: "Where we really focused to begin with was city facilities," he said. Hence, the in-house recycling program.

Fruin said that Normal employees were encouraged to set their printers for double-sided printing as a default. Documents that had been distributed on paper were made available digitally. In one year, Fruin said, the city reduced its paper use by 10 percent, with the goal of reducing usage by 25 percent over the course of several years.

Employees were also encouraged to turn off lights and radios when they left the office, and to recycle.

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The Green Team then presented a list of recommendations to the town council for items that cost money. The list was approved in September, and included bicycles to go along with the vehicle fleet, lighting upgrades to all facilities, and a fluorescent-bulb "eater" that captures the toxins of compact-fluorescent bulbs and keeps them out of the waste stream.

While a Green Team isn't necessary, "it just kept us on task," Fruin said. "It kept people engaged."

The Rock Island Green Team, Ridder said, was developed to ensure that efforts are coordinated. "There's a lot of cities doing pieces," he said, "but we need a central tie-in, to make sure everyone's working together."

Malin was dismissive of the idea that one staff member (or a handful of staff) is the most effective way to instill sustainability into city government. "Ours is much more of a team approach," he said. "I think we gain more ground thinking as a team. ... In a workforce of 800 or more employees, having just one person think about that or be responsible for it is window dressing."

### Into the Community

Government, of course, is just one element of a community, and no matter what it does, if citizens don't change their habits, municipalities will have a limited impact.

For all the green initiatives that Rock Island has undertaken, it's clear that it has work to do to bring the community along. Half of residents surveyed by the city still favor leaf-burning, and only 1,400 households - a little more than 10 percent of refuse customers - have signed contracts for \$3-a-month curbside recycling.

Ridder conceded that external environmental initiatives must contend with constituents. "We have to deal with the politics," he said.

That's the primary reason Rock Island's curbside recycling is voluntary, while Moline's charges all residents for the service.

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“I’d rather have people who want to be participating than forcing everyone to do it,” Ridder said. “Enforced participation would make it very unpopular.”

Getting buy-in for curbside recycling, though, is a different animal from banning leaf-burning. People who don’t want to recycle - or who don’t want to pay for recycling - don’t have to. But a leaf-burning ban would affect everybody.

“You can beat them over the head with it and say, ‘You’re banned from doing this,’” Ridder said. “But I’ve always believed the better way of doing things is to educate them, make them see that the right answer is the one you’re offering.”

The city has tried to cut down on burning. It offers free leaf bags and free leaf pickup in the fall, but people still burn.

Ridder said that might be a failure of getting the information out there and heard. “We do our best,” he said. “We manage operations. Managing marketing is not our number-one goal.”

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Ridder said that city government must first set an example. "Which comes first?" he said. "Do you get your citizens to do it first, or do you get the city to do it first?"

That government-should-lead attitude certainly can't hurt. Wally Mook, Bettendorf's public-works director, drives his municipal government's only hybrid vehicle.

Mook said that three years ago, "I needed to replace my existing vehicle, which was a gas-guzzler."

So he asked the city's vehicle-replacement committee for a low-emission Honda Civic hybrid, which gets 45 miles per gallon compared to his old GMC sport-utility's 10 miles per gallon.

Mook also serves on the Quad Cities Air Quality Task Force, and he said his vehicle sends the right message. "Somebody in my position ought to at least be demonstrating that we're trying to do something as far as the environment," he said.