

Is Portland a Sustainable City?

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The city of Portland is located in the state of Oregon, in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. The city is making significant strides towards more sustainable ways of life, making it one of North America's leaders of sustainability. For decades, the city has aimed at reducing its environmental impact through many different initiatives. These initiatives include: land use strategies that encouraged densification, protecting green spaces, green-building energy initiatives, investing in alternative transportation, and municipal solid waste management strategies.<sup>1</sup> Many of these projects have been successfully established in the city, with many more to come. Although these projects and initiatives have put the city on the right path towards sustainability, a lot more still needs to be done.

Portland is one of the seventeen C40 cities in North America. The C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group was founded in 2005 by the Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone.<sup>2</sup> He gathered representatives from 18 megacities to create an agreement that would cooperatively reduce climate pollution.<sup>3</sup> As a C40 city, Portland has been required to collaborate with the other C40 cities and take urgent action on climate change with ambitious projects that support science backed targets since its membership started in 2006.<sup>4</sup> The city of Portland has made many agreements targeted at reducing the city's carbon emissions, thus reducing pollution in the city. These agreements include ones to: the Net Zero Carbon Building Declaration, Advancing Towards Zero Waste Declaration, Clean Air Cities Declaration and the Equity Pledge.<sup>5</sup> When it comes to a climate action plan, "Portland was the first U.S. city to create a local action plan for cutting carbon" in 1993.<sup>6</sup> Their action plan is working towards achieving a 40% reduction of carbon emissions by the year 2030 and an 80% reduction by 2050.<sup>7</sup> Overall, Portland is actively engaging in sustainability planning with other cities. This signifies their commitment and desire to work collaboratively with others to achieve urban sustainability.

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<sup>1</sup> The Worldwatch Institute, *Can a City Be Sustainable?* (Washington: Island Press, 2016)

<sup>2</sup> "C40 Cities," accessed February 14, 2022. <https://www.c40.org/about-c40/>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> "C40," Portland, United States. Accessed February 14, 2022. <https://www.c40.org/cities/portland/>

<sup>6</sup> "Climate Action Plan," The City of Portland Oregon. Accessed Feb 14, 2022.

<https://www.portlandoregon.gov/bps/index.cfm?&c=49989>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

The Worldwatch Institute outlines seven criteria needed for a sustainable city in the 2016 publication of *Can a City be Sustainable?*. By using this criteria to analyse the city of Portland, it is clear that Portland has made significant strides to fulfil this criteria. Despite these successes, the city still falls short in some categories. According to the Worldwatch Institute, the first criteria of a sustainable city is waste reduction. Portland has made dramatic changes to how they collect and sort municipal solid waste. A weekly compost and recycling pick up program has allowed for every-other week garbage collection.<sup>8</sup> These changes have resulted in a doubling of composting rates by residents, and a 35% decrease in waste being taken to landfills.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Portland's residential recycling rate is nearly 250% higher than that of the U.S. national average, making them the nation's front runner in recycling municipal solid waste.<sup>10</sup> Overall, these changes have led to less waste entering landfills, and more waste being recycled and repurposed.

A sustainable city is one that allows for nature to thrive alongside human activity. The City of Portland works with many different companies to help builders and planners integrate clean energy systems and nature services into their buildings.<sup>11</sup> Different eco-friendly features such as green roofs, insulated windows, and more efficient heating and cooling systems are just a few examples proving how the City of Portland is committed to more sustainable urban infrastructure by making the buildings more energy-efficient, reducing overall energy use.<sup>12</sup>

A notable mention for working towards energy efficiency is the PECEI (Portland Energy Conservation Inc), which was founded in Portland in 1979. It was originally formed as a non profit corporation with the objective to have commitment to the advancement in energy use, generation and policy. They did this through giving out loans to businesses and homeowners so that they could undertake energy audits and outfit new buildings, in an effort to make them more sustainable. Throughout the 40 plus years that the PECEI has been in operation they have curated quite an impressive "nationally-recognized portfolio of energy efficiency programs, addressing existing

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<sup>8</sup> The Worldwatch Institute, *Can a City Be Sustainable?* (Washington: Island Press, 2016)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

buildings, new construction and commissioning.”<sup>13</sup> It is also important to note that this originated during the nationwide energy crisis in the 1970s. The people of Portland “demand[ed] for responsible energy use and environmentally sensitive governance” which led to the 1979 Portland Energy Policy. The PECE was created out of that policy with its purpose being to carry out what was promised in the energy policy.<sup>14</sup>

More importantly, the ways in which Portland is designing their city is crucial to their sustainable development. By adopting land-use policies, the city is effectively limiting urban sprawl. This policy, adopted in the 1970s, prohibits further expansion of the metropolitan area within the city limits.<sup>15</sup> This policy was an attempt to prevent urban sprawl, and requires city builders to increase density as a way to meet urban development needs.<sup>16</sup> In addition to this, these land use strategies have supported the construction and protection of many natural reservoirs, refuges, and parks, such as the Smith and Bybee Wetlands Natural Area, Tryon Creek State Natural Area, and the Oaks Bottom Wildlife Refuge.<sup>17</sup> By providing ecosystem services, aesthetic benefits, and life cycle resources to various species, these green spaces further contribute to sustainable development of cities by effectively integrating nature and serving ecosystem needs.

In more recent years, many projects attempted to increase the accessibility and connectedness of the different areas of the city. Portland strives for sustainable connectedness and transport through many different projects such as: bridges inhibiting use by private vehicles, the Green Loop Project, and the Portland Streetcar, all of which connect the citizens of the community to different areas of the city, and promote more sustainable forms of transportation such as cycling and public transport.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> “A legacy in Common,” PECE. Accessed February 14, 2022. <http://origin.peci.org/about/origin/>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> The Worldwatch Institute, *Can a City Be Sustainable?* (Washington: Island Press, 2016)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> “Oaks Bottom Wildlife Refuge,” Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, accessed February 14, 2022. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oaks\\_Bottom\\_Wildlife\\_Refuge](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oaks_Bottom_Wildlife_Refuge); “Smith and Bybee Wetlands Natural Area,” Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, accessed February 14, 2022. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smith\\_and\\_Bybee\\_Wetlands\\_Natural\\_Area](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smith_and_Bybee_Wetlands_Natural_Area); “Tryon Creek Natural State Area,” Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, accessed February 14, 2022. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tryon\\_Creek\\_State\\_Natural\\_Area](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tryon_Creek_State_Natural_Area)

<sup>18</sup> The Worldwatch Institute, *Can a City Be Sustainable?* (Washington: Island Press, 2016)

Indirectly, these initiatives contribute to the characteristic of creative placemaking in sustainable cities, by creating unique features connecting different parts of the city. However, this is one sector where the city needs to expand their projects in order to achieve sustainability. Although these projects have been successful, and are good examples of sustainable infrastructure, projects such as these need to be widespread throughout the entire city. These sustainability projects are largely centred in the downtown core, however a sustainable city requires all citizens living in all areas of the city to have convenient access to these services. Therefore, in order to achieve sustainability, the City of Portland must make these projects more widespread.

Many of Portland's sustainability initiatives are indirectly making the city a place of well-being for their residences. There are plenty of green spaces within the city, providing residences with many aesthetic and mental health benefits.<sup>19</sup> In addition to this, through making these city projects and sustainable initiatives possible (for example, land use policy, Green Loop Project, Portland streetcar, green energy, etc), the city successfully created a significant amount of new jobs for its citizens.<sup>20</sup> The Green Loop Project alone will create more than 50,000 jobs in the city.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, not only are these projects making Portland a more sustainable city through their environmental benefits, but they are also contributing to the well-being of their local citizens. In addition to this, Portland is making the city a place of well-being for their citizens by putting the people's needs before profit. The Worldwatch Institute claims that the city's initiatives reflect the government's "thinking beyond first costs and consideration of the long-term, cumulative impacts of policy and financial decisions."<sup>22</sup> Overall, the steps taken by the City of Portland in recent decades to fund green initiatives and environmental projects to help the city achieve sustainability, demonstrates that the city is being developed with a people-first approach.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> "Green Loop Project," accessed January 30, 2022. <https://www.portland.gov/bps/green-loop/about>

<sup>22</sup> The Worldwatch Institute, *Can a City Be Sustainable?* (Washington: Island Press, 2016), 295.

It is without a doubt that the City of Portland is making significant strides towards sustainability within their city. Evaluating Portland by using the seven principles of sustainability, it is clear that the city is actively striving towards sustainability. Despite these impressive efforts, there is still more that needs to be done. There are lots of opportunities for many of these projects and initiatives to expand beyond the downtown core, having equal and widespread effects across the city. For example, expanding public transport services to all areas of the city would make transportation alternatives more accessible, and more practical for citizens living in areas away from the core of the city. Overall, in order to earn the title of a sustainable city, sustainable practices must be accessible and adopted by every individual in every part of the city.

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