City of Winston-Salem Sustainability Plan Executive Summary

The threat of climate change in recent years has become clearer and more present to our natural and human systems. The predicted impacts from increasing temperatures “means more intense heat waves, windier hurricanes, and bigger floods – with ever-increasing economic impacts,” according to Andrew Winston in his 2014 publication The Big Pivot (p.1). Since then, the world reached human-induced global warming of 1 degree Celsius in 2017 (Allen, et al. 2018 p. 59). The observed impacts from global warming already show the changes happening that Winston predicted. It is important for leadership on a local level as necessary to achieve the limited warming of 1.5° C since “the effects of a city’s actions are not limited to its own borders or region…,”(Orr, et al. 2019, p. 2).

Cities in the Southeast region and the state of North Carolina, where the City of Winston-Salem is located, had chosen to become climate leaders through setting emissions reduction goals and creating climate action or sustainability plans. In North Carolina alone, at least a dozen cities had an emissions reduction goal and/or a sustainability plan. As one of the largest cities in the state, we were not keeping pace with the other cities and communities.

To understand why the city lagged, we can review the history of the program. The Office of Sustainability and the Sustainability Manager position were both created in 2010 from grant funds. Unfortunately when funding ran out, it greatly restricted the actions the office was able to take, which is when reporting and benchmarking became the focus. The numerous benchmarking efforts that were undertaken in the Office of Sustainability helped provide baselines and solid data in several sustainability categories, but none of it was being put to use. As a way to spark sustainability efforts once again in the city, the Office of Sustainability decided to create a sustainability action plan for internal operations. The plan would help guide the next five years of sustainability efforts in the city with the goal being to lower emissions from municipal functions in the areas of Transportation, Energy Systems, Green Space and Waste Systems.

By employing a sustainability best practice in creating a sustainability plan, the city is once again striving to compete with peer cities in North Carolina and the Southeast region in the sustainability field. If the plan finds success in implementation and results, there is strong possibility the plan leads to further and more ambitious sustainability efforts throughout the community.