Integrating Sustainability Targets into Strategic Plans
A case study featuring Lawrence, KS, Riverside, CA, and Raleigh, NC

When most people think of city plans, they think of comprehensive or long-range plans, which provide broad guidance for community-wide development and decision making on a ten to twenty year horizon. These types of plans are often criticized as documents that “just live on the shelf,” meaning they were developed but never implemented. Comprehensive plans can have the tendency to be visionary and lack defined metrics and targets to measure success over time.

To make measurable progress within a shorter timeframe, elected officials and city managers regularly supplement comprehensive plans with short-term strategic plans. These plans tend to be more concrete and narrowly focused than comprehensive plans. A strategic plan will establish the community’s highest priority issues for the next two to five years and then outline a specific action plan to address these priorities with clearly defined targets, timelines, and responsibilities for implementation.

The STAR Community Rating System, the leading sustainability framework and certification program in the United States, can be a helpful resource for communities that are developing a strategic plan. The STAR goal areas and objectives can be used to frame and organize a strategic plan, while STAR outcome and action measures can be used as performance targets and actions for the plan. Embedding STAR evaluation measures into a plan doesn’t just help with writing and development, but can also support the implementation and tracking phases of a plan. Below are examples of how three certified STAR communities have used the rating system to integrate sustainability and data-driven performance management into their strategic plans.

Lawrence, KS

During the hiring process of a new city manager in early 2016, the city commission for Lawrence, KS identified the need for a strategic plan that would support implementation of the city’s comprehensive plan. The two-year strategic plan could be used to drive yearly budget discussions and ensure that city projects, programs, and services are aligned with communitywide goals.

Around the same time as the new city manager was starting, the City of Lawrence Office of Sustainability was wrapping up data collection for STAR certification. In October 2016, Lawrence achieved a 4-STAR Community Rating and was recognized for national excellence in community sustainability (image at right). The timely certification helped to form the baseline for the new strategic plan.

“City leadership was looking for a way to develop and prioritize strategic goals and identify measurable strategies and objectives. The close timing of the STAR certification helped shape and inform this conversation,” says Jasmin Moore, Sustainability Director for City of Lawrence.
STAR's holistic framework for community sustainability became fundamental to the development of the new strategic plan. The plan identified seven critical success factors (image at right) to serve as guideposts for city staff to achieve the following vision: “The City of Lawrence—supporting an unmistakably vibrant community with innovative, equitable, transparent and responsible local government.” The critical success factors include:

1. Effective Governance & Professional Administration
2. Safe, Healthy & Welcoming Neighborhoods
3. Innovative Infrastructure & Asset Management
4. Commitment to Core Services
5. Sound Fiscal Stewardship
6. Collaborative Solutions
7. Economic Growth & Security

After the critical success factors were identified, teams were developed to identify how success would be measured within each. The city's certification results provided the teams with strong data that could be used to benchmark performance against similar jurisdictions and identify gaps and opportunities for improvement. The teams reviewed STAR outcome measures and determined which could be used to track progress towards the plan's seven main goals.

“Our STAR certification demonstrated that we had reliable data and meaningful metrics, which matched up really well with each of the seven critical success factors in the strategic plan,” says Moore.

At the conclusion of the plan development process, eleven STAR outcome measures were selected to measure progress. For example, in the “Safe, Healthy & Welcoming Neighborhoods” critical success factor, outcome measures from STAR’s Public Parkland objective within the Built Environment goal area were selected as performance measures for tracking access to parks (images below). To demonstrate accountability and transparency to the community, Lawrence has created a publicly accessible online dashboard on the city's website and updates the performance measures quarterly.
“Embedding STAR outcomes into our strategic plan helps keep STAR front of mind for staff and emphasizes that sustainability is not just the job of the sustainability office, but is the job of all city staff,” says Moore.

Riverside, CA

For the City of Riverside, located just outside of Los Angeles County, balancing growth with sustainability is both a priority and a challenge. To conduct a baseline of local sustainability, Riverside went through the STAR certification process in 2015 and received a 3-STAR Community Rating.

At the same time city staff members were collecting data for their STAR application, they were also developing the Riverside Restorative Growthprint (RRG), a plan to balance economic growth and sustainability. The RRG combines two plans: the Economic Prosperity Action Plan and the Climate Action Plan, which work in conjunction to spur entrepreneurship and smart growth while advancing the city’s greenhouse gas (GHG) emission reduction goals.

“A primary purpose and goal of the Riverside Restorative Growthprint is to concurrently address climate change and create opportunities for entrepreneurial growth that will contribute to a sustainable and prosperous community,” says Steve Hayes, Riverside City Planner.

A unique blend of experts came together to develop the hybrid plan. Representatives from the city’s economic development and public works departments, as well as engineers, marketing professionals, sustainability professionals, and transportation planners all worked on the Growthprint. To ensure that progress is tracked and met, the RRG identified nine Entrepreneurial Opportunity Areas (EOAs) that will track the plan’s implementation. All of the EOAs have a direct or indirect relationship to the evaluation measures contained in the STAR Community Rating System. The alignment is below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Built Environment</th>
<th>Climate &amp; Energy</th>
<th>Economy &amp; Jobs</th>
<th>Education, Arts &amp; Community</th>
<th>Equity &amp; Empowerment</th>
<th>Health &amp; Safety</th>
<th>Natural Systems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Energy &amp; Water Upgrades for Home and Business</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>2. Green Building Standards</td>
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<td>3. Clean Vehicles and Charging/Fueling Stations</td>
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<td>4. Riverside Public Utility Clean Technology Funding</td>
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<td>5. Waste Reduction &amp; Diversion</td>
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<td>6. Expand Bicycle Infrastructure</td>
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<td>7. Eco/Innovation Business Zone</td>
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<td>8. Clean-Tech Incubator</td>
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<td>9. Buy and Produce Local Initiative</td>
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“Many economic and environmental benefits will occur with implementation of the RRG, including cost savings benefits to businesses and local institutions, as well as public health benefits associated with lowering levels of GHG emissions, clean transportation alternatives, and increased resource efficiency,” says Hayes.

By targeting specific topics in the RRG that align with the STAR Community Rating System, Riverside will be able to use STAR recertification to track overall progress.

“The STAR Community Rating System has and will continue to provide the city with a comprehensive tool to align, prioritize, and track progress of our current and future strategic sustainability goals contained in several current and future policy documents (RRG, General Plan 2040, EV Citywide Strategy and Master Plan, etc.) into one easy-to-follow document that allows us to track and benchmark our sustainability priorities in a meaningful manner,” says Hayes.

**Raleigh, NC**

After spending much of 2014 gathering data for certification, the City of Raleigh received a 4-STAR Community Rating in the spring of 2015. During this time, Raleigh was also in the process of a leadership transition that involved a new city manager and other senior staff. As a part of the transition and at the direction of the city council, the city decided to develop its first ever [strategic plan](#). Through an inclusive process with city staff and other partners, the plan was adopted soon after the STAR certification.

The plan, which has since gone through one revision in 2017, used the STAR Community Rating System as a source of key information during the plan’s development.

“Leadership understood the importance of the STAR analysis and chose to incorporate it into the plan’s development process,” says Cindy Holmes, Assistant Sustainability Manager for Raleigh.

The plan identifies six strategic focus areas:

1. Arts & Cultural Resources
2. Economic Development & Innovation
3. Growth & Natural Resources
4. Organizational Excellence
5. Safe, Vibrant & Healthy Community
6. Transportation & Transit

These strategic focus areas are then broken down into objectives and initiatives, each with defined performance metrics. “By including specific performance metrics in the strategic plan, the city is able to track progress to strategically use resources,” says Holmes.
Many of the objectives and initiatives in the plan align with STAR evaluation measures. For example, objective two in the “Growth & Natural Resources” focus area states that the city should “increase the connected network of green spaces that conserve natural resources and promote outdoor activity.”

This objective aligns closely with the STAR outcome measures in the Public Parkland objective within the Built Environment goal area. In addition, one of Raleigh’s initiatives for this objective is to create an open-space plan, which is also a STAR action in the Public Parkland objective.

“By aligning several of our strategic plan objectives and initiatives with the STAR Community Rating System, we will be able to use nationally vetted best practices and be able to track our progress through recertification.”

The City will track the progress of their objectives and initiatives in an online dashboard.

ABOUT STAR

The STAR Community Rating System (STAR) is the nation’s leading comprehensive framework and certification program for evaluating local sustainability, encompassing economic, environmental, and social performance measures. Local leaders use the rating system’s evaluation measures to assess their current level of sustainability, set targets for moving ahead, and measure progress along the way.

For more information on how to use the STAR Community Rating System in local plans to drive change in your community, please contact:

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