BRINGING EQUITY INTO THE SUSTAINABILITY CONVERSATION
A case study featuring Dubuque, IA

STAR certification provides a clear, data-driven approach to assessing a community’s sustainability efforts. The baseline assessment achieved through certification is an important first step to advancing community-wide sustainability, as it often reveals areas for improvement. Certified STAR communities are digging into their certification results and finding the tools to engage partners and work towards creating more equitable and sustainable communities through data and performance indicators.

The City of Dubuque, IA received a certified 4-STAR Community Rating in April of 2015 and immediately embarked on putting their certification results to work. City staff began by reengaging the numerous partners that they worked with during the data gathering process, including the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque, Dubuque Community School District, Dubuque County, the Iowa State University Extension, the arts community, and local nonprofits. These groups were a key part of the city’s certification and were excited to help the city to address gaps and implement best practices from the STAR Community Rating System (STAR).

Dubuque decided to focus on improving their lowest scoring goal area, Equity & Empowerment. Two factors led to low performance in this area: a general lack of activity in the community and a lack of common metrics to track progress across groups and initiatives. The first step was to analyze the STAR action measures that the city did not achieve to identify low-hanging fruit and opportunities for improvement. It quickly became clear that Dubuque needed a community-wide strategy to coordinate the various ongoing efforts and to better utilize local resources.

While city staffers were gathering data for STAR certification, a community effort called Inclusive Dubuque was also getting off the ground. This initiative brought together over 50 partners from businesses, nonprofits, schools, and government organizations to discuss equity issues and identify metrics to better understand the state of equity in Dubuque. The partnership’s work sessions provided an opportunity for the city to share the data and results from their STAR certification with residents and community partners.
Organizers of the Inclusive Dubuque initiative decided to dive deeper and conduct a community equity profile based around seven specific equity issues: economic wellbeing, housing, education, health, safe neighborhoods, transportation, and arts/culture. City staff worked closely with Inclusive Dubuque to identify STAR metrics that would help to measure progress in each of the seven areas. This work led to the development of action plans based off of the data in the profile and a concerted effort to use common metrics to measure progress across all issue areas. The equity profile is available online to promote transparency and accountability.

Assistant City Manager Cori Burbach (formerly the Sustainable Community Coordinator) has been able to use the city’s STAR certification results to help other community groups address equity gaps in their work. One such example is Dubuque Eats Well, a strong and active food access community group that brings together producers, consumers, and institutions to collaborate and grow an equitable and sustainable food system. Burbach reached out to the group and offered to present the STAR measures related to their work. After hearing the presentation, Dubuque Eats Well decided to use the same measures to track their group’s future progress.

This translated to real action when Allison Mitchell, a student from the University of Dubuque, reached out to Burbach about a potential research project to address access to healthy food. Mitchell proposed implementing pop-up food stands in food deserts, which are neighborhoods without convenient access to healthy and affordable food. Food deserts are often found in areas with higher percentages of low-income residents and are known to contribute to negative health outcomes and disparities.

To ensure that the project addressed equity gaps, Burbach shared data that the city gathered for STAR’s Food Access and Nutrition area, which included a map of local food deserts (image below). The student used this data to apply an equity lens to the project and determine the best locations for the food stands.

“To me that is the power of STAR. It is getting information out there to the community so they can make more informed decisions about the work they are doing and the resources they have access to. It’s not just about what the city can do,” said Burbach.
As Dubuque begins to think about recertification in 2019, the newly formed Resilient Community Advisory Commission is using the STAR framework to identify quick wins and larger, systemic issues that should be addressed to create a more equitable and resilient community. The city will be using their certification results to inform resiliency efforts and ensure that all residents are included in the city's future resiliency efforts and plans.

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 to measure equity and track progress in your community, please contact:

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*Photos courtesy of the City of Dubuque and Inclusive Dubuque.*