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A Conversation With . . .

Sustainability Coordinators Larry Rich, Meredith Reynolds



Sustainability Coordinators Larry Rich and Meredith Reynolds at the former Acres of Books, where they and youth volunteers deconstructed bookshelves and harvested wood to be used in community gardens and the like. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

Just over two years ago, the City of Long Beach strengthened its mission to become a more sustainable city to meet human needs while maintaining the environment around us by creating the office of sustainability.

In April 2008, Meredith Reynolds, a department analyst, and Larry Rich, a planner, relocated from their positions with Long Beach Development Services to become the city's sustainability coordinators. The two report to City Manager Pat West and Assistant City Manager Suzanne Frick to fulfill the goals of the mayor and city council and implement sustainable efforts within city government departments and beyond.

Reynolds and Rich work together to facilitate sustainable programs for the city and provide leadership and practical solutions to improve Long Beach in a variety of ways. By focusing on making Long Beach healthier and more efficient economically, environmentally and socially, Reynolds and Rich work with the Long Beach Sustainable City Commission to deliver policy and pro-

grams that address waste reduction, transportation, water, energy, urban nature, green products and services and building and neighborhood planning.

The office's 2010 operating budget was close to \$350,000, according to Reynolds, and they are slated to receive a \$419,000 budget for fiscal year 2011. Reynolds and Rich are still budgeted under the development services department, although they report to the city manager. The office also manages \$4.4 million in federal stimulus energy efficiency grants, \$100,000 in AQMD grants and \$2 million in green job training grants in part with the Pacific Gateway Workforce Investment Network.

Both coordinators sat down with Staff Writer Tiffany Rider to talk about their work efforts and how sustainability is being incorporated in Long Beach.

LBBJ: Since the office's inception, what are some of its biggest accomplishments?

Reynolds: The biggest thing is the Sustainable City Action Plan.



Larry Rich, sustainability coordinator for the City of Long Beach, works with a group of interns at the city's Farm Lot 59. From left: David Magdangal, John Guevarra, April Sabucco, Rich, Jason Gallup and Barry Prak. The half-acre farm and half-acre mulch yard is a partnership project among several Long Beach agencies. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

Rich: The office was created to work with the newly created sustainable city commission, and the first charge of the commission was to develop what we ended up calling the Sustainable City Action Plan. We, as staff, work with the commission. They meet every month, so month after month we were bringing them another drafted section of the Sustainable City Action Plan for them to approve as we went along. Ultimately, we took that whole package to the city council for their approval.

LBBJ: And that was approved this year, correct?

Rich: Yes, on February 2. That was a two-year process that was completed this year. Now we're responsible for working with the different city departments to implement the goals. When there isn't a directly relevant city department, it's our responsibility to try and meet those goals.

LBBJ: How is sustainability incorporated into the city departments?

Reynolds: We do a lot of partnering, negotiating, persuading. . . . In terms of the different departments, it's usually surrounded by a project, and really the relationships were fostered when we started building the plan. A lot of other goals from different plans are incorporated in ours. So the Harbor and Port Clean Air Action Plan – their goals are included. The water department's water conservation goals are included. A lot of our existing policies and programs are built into it. For example, we do our greenhouse gas emissions inventory every year, so all the greenhouse gas regional targets are in there. So we really fostered these relationships as we were going to the different departments and were working with them on the different sections of the plan. That's where it started.

Now that the plan has been approved, this has transitioned into specific projects. We do a lot of work with development services related to all the green building, planning, ordinances and low-impact development – those types of policies. We do a lot of work with public works for our municipal building retrofits, our own fleet for the green fleet initiatives and then workforce development for all their green jobs programs as well as parks, recreation and marine. It really depends on what we need from folks and we try to get them on board early and often.

We have a green team. At least one member from most of our city departments meet internally once a month where we can tell them about the different things we're working on so we can sol-

ic- it their ideas. We even do some training with them. So we have sort of a champion in each department that we can call on when we need assistance in addition to the other relationships that we've built over the years.

LBBJ: Do you ever sit down with Mayor Foster to discuss sustainability ideas?

Reynolds: That's typically done with our supervisors Pat West and Suzanne Frick. Being the former president of Southern California Edison, the mayor is big on energy and solar. He likes the green workforce and local jobs and that sort of thing, so we know what some of his priorities are and we're happy to oblige because they're within our plan just as well.

LBBJ: What is the Long Beach Green Business Recognition Program?

Reynolds: The Green Business Recognition Program is a year-round program with a one-page application. Business can elect to say, 'Hey, I'm doing green things in multiple areas and this is what I'm doing.' We're not in the business of picking winners and losers. We're really in the business of promoting folks who have done really well. So what we plan on doing is that once folks apply, they are then recognized by the commission, they are recognized by the council and their bio goes on our Web site as a 'best practice' so that other businesses can mimic and copy. We've had a couple of businesses apply so far and we will probably have them at our next commission meeting on September 23. As we move forward and more folks apply and we continue to get the word out, we will continue to promote additional businesses.

LBBJ: Are the qualifications for green businesses broad?

Reynolds: Yes. It can be any green business. We're really looking at how green your operations are. We're looking at businesses to provide examples in several categories, including things like purchasing, staff training and awareness, energy and water use, landscaping and a couple other things. You have to do something in each category, but we're looking at the businesses to tell us what their best idea is and what they're doing.

LBBJ: Since the Sustainable City Action Plan was passed in February, how is it being implemented?

Rich: The way that we're going to track our progress is through an annual report card. We plan on releasing the report card every April during Earth Week. We had an intern working on the baseline

of everything. Because the plan was adopted in February, this April was too soon to be reporting on progress. But we needed to do the work on what our baseline was for these different categories, so we've established that for the most part. We have a draft report card to plug in our achievements year by year as we go along.

We've got goals in the plan that are near, medium and long-term in the form of goals that we want to meet by 2012, 2016 and 2020. As we came up with the horizons for each one of the goals, they had to do with what we can achieve relatively quickly and what's going to take a while. So to see the big reductions in greenhouse gases we want to see in terms of 15 or 20 percent as it states in the plan, it is going to take a while to reach those goals. So we don't have an ultimate goal for that until 2020 because we're going to need some time to ramp up and put some investment in those areas.

There are other simpler things, and these aren't always what we are directly implementing. For example, in 2012, we have a goal that there should be six new community gardens. We're not directly establishing community gardens. For the most part, people in the community are establishing them . . . and that's great because that's how we're going to achieve most of our goals – by the initiative and participation of a lot of other people. That just makes our job easier and possible because we can't do all this stuff ourselves.

LBBJ: Is there a major sustainability forum or event coming up?

Rich: We don't put on our own event because we've got too many other things to do. But we participate in other things that go on. I think the next big thing that's coming up is the Green Port Festival in October. The thing that we do is during Earth Week – the week around Earth Day – is we highlight the green activities the city's doing. We have a number of press events. We've done

that twice now. We've been in existence for two years and it's grown each year. This past year we put together an Earth Week calendar that our office did that detailed the different things going on around Earth Week, both things that other people were doing and the press events we were doing.

LBBJ: Is there a municipal sustainability group made up of officials from surrounding cities in the state?

Rich: No. Our sustainable city commission is kind of the formalized version of that. It meets every month in the city council chambers and there are representatives from each of the nine council districts and at least one at-large member appointed by the mayor's office. That's the public forum where people from the public can come and say what's on their mind and check in on what's going on in the city. I have met with the City of Signal Hill. They have a sustainable city task force, and I have interfaced with that group before. There are other groups we have interfaced with, like the Gateway Cities Council of Governments, Southern California Association of Governments, the Regional Water Quality Control Board, [South Coast] Air Quality Management District and the Watershed Council, but we don't have a regular meeting and they certainly don't get together all in one place.

LBBJ: How does the City of Long Beach sustainability effort compare with other cities in the state?

Rich: There are some rating systems out there, and the one we've seen in the past is called SustainLane. . . . That's the one where they send out the same survey to every different city in an attempt to rank them. They've put out two rankings so far. At the time, Long Beach didn't necessarily rank too well. I think we were in the lower 50 percent of rankings. What they do is they rank the 50 largest

Sustainable City Action Plan Goals For 2012

Urban Nature – Annual increase of youth who are trained as Long Beach Bioneers: The office has partnered with the Pacific Gateway Workforce Investment Network to create green job training programs for youth. The concept, developed by Long Beach Sustainability Coordinator Larry Rich, is to involve teens in tree planting, mulch deliveries, native landscaping, installing rainwater recapture barrels and urban gardening. The youth are paid minimum wage through grant funding.

Waste Reduction – Annual reduction of solid waste generated per person per day: The City of Long Beach has been recognized as a leader in the state as having one of the best waste diversion rates. The city's environmental services bureau monitors and calculates the rate for the city, and the office wants to use these statistics and incorporate them into the annual report card.

Water – Distribute rain barrel catchment systems to residents and five city facilities by 2012: So far, 65 barrels have been distributed to residents and one to the north branch library.

Transportation – Increase city employee average vehicle ridership to 1.5 by 2012: Reduce vehicle miles traveled by encouraging carpooling, mass transit, bicycling or walking. Also encourage the next generation of vehicles, such as plug-in electric cars.

Also, reduce future port related emissions

by more than 45 percent by 2011: This goal of the port's is stated in its Clear Air Action Plan, and the port asked for its inclusion in the city's Sustainable City Action Plan. According to Long Beach Sustainability Coordinator Meredith Reynolds, the Clean Trucks Program contributed significantly to this goal almost overnight. The port is tracking GHG and particulate matter reductions.

Green Economy & Lifestyle – Identify and develop at least 2,000 green collar jobs by 2012: Rich said the goal here is to look at existing and the potential for future businesses in Long Beach who employ green collar workers. So far the office has identified about 1,000 such jobs, including those who work at bicycle shops and Long Beach Transit. Other green jobs are in environmental cleanup related to construction. The coordinators hope new companies will come into the city to help create more green jobs here.

Enroll 100 green businesses in the Long Beach Green Business Certification Program by 2012: This recognition program started about three months ago and has received three applications. Businesses will be recognized at sustainable city commission meetings, council meetings and on the city's sustainability Web site.

Increase citizen participation at green events: Increase participation numbers at the annual Green Port Festival in October, the water department's Earth Day celebrations in April and community-organized events like the Long Beach Green Festival and Green Is Greater Festival.

Buildings and Neighborhoods – Double the number of LEED accredited professionals (or equivalent) in the city and community by 2012: LEED stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design and is a green voluntary rating system for buildings and neighborhoods developed by the U.S. Green Building Council.

One hundred percent of city owned vacant lots are utilized with interim green uses by 2012: Cover the vacant dirt lots throughout the city – most of which are owned by the Long Beach Redevelopment Agency – with mulch. The mulch is created through tree trimming waste through a program called Operation Mulch-a-lot, which prevents the waste from reaching landfills. Applying a thick layer of mulch on lots suppresses weed growth and acts as a sponge to hold onto rainwater. About 15 lots have been covered, equating to about 6,000 tons of green waste reused in the city, and one lot was turned into the Wrigley Community Garden.

Create at least six new community gardens by 2012: There are about 15 existing community gardens in the city, and two new ones were established this summer through community efforts. The office helps by donating mulch and other material assistance when available. Long Beach has been ranked with the third highest number of plots per capita after Seattle and Portland by Trust for Public Land. The largest community garden is located in El Dorado Park with close to 100 plots. There are an estimated 650 individual garden plots in the city, according to Rich. ■

cities in the U.S. So Long Beach is the 36th largest city in the U.S. although we're dropping down all the time, as the other Sunbelt cities grow bigger than we can grow. Fresno, for example, has outpaced us in population. But we haven't seen a recent rating from SustainLane, so I don't know if they've continued their system.

Reynolds: Another thing is that the Natural Resources Defense Council did a "2010 Smarter Cities" report, and Long Beach was one of those cities featured in U.S.A. Today, Huffington Post and other AP-carried news outlets where we were highlighted as an up-and-coming or surprise green city.

Rich: That was the thing about the SustainLane ranking – they were being done before our office came into existence. So there were a lot of things that we couldn't report on, like our plan hadn't been created yet. Then there are other things that we had no control over, like that they were using data that's out there from the environmental protection agency or something like that. So Long Beach didn't rate well with air quality, but it wasn't Long Beach – it's the whole L.A. Basin and we're stuck with that for the time being.

LBBJ: If you had an unlimited budget, what would the office spend it on?

Reynolds: Projects.

Rich: For me, because of the projects I'm involved with now, green job and youth green job training and awareness because, again, the more people that we bring in early, they will be working on this sort of thing for a lifetime potentially. Get them in early and wait and see the results over the long term.

Reynolds: I think for me, again, I do a lot of the energy and retrofits and that sort of thing, it's green infrastructure. You hear a lot about potholes not being filled and this, that and the other thing. Well, when they do street resurfacing they use recycled tires and they do a lot of green treatments to that street. We could carry that through with permeable pavement with concrete. We could be pouring money into our municipal buildings and making them more efficient, doing whole building retrofits, getting them LEED certified and things like that.

The infrastructure – things that have been here for a lifetime and will probably be here for another lifetime to serve our community – for me, that's the biggest bang for our buck in terms of the whole unlimited budget where we could actually reduce bills to such a degree and use renewable energy like solar and wind and other things so we could actually run the meter backwards if you will. Thermal ice storage and other interesting new technologies . . . LED streetlights, things that would really bring our bills down. From a long-term perspective, you can put in a bunch of money up front and over the course of the 20 or 30 years or the life of these systems, those bills will be very small. So for me, that's probably where I would go.

Rich: People are aware of solar energy and retrofits, and those sorts of things need to be done. But we've been exploring this pol-

icy called low-impact development, which has to do with managing stormwater on site. In a coastal city like Long Beach where we've got the challenge of water quality along our shoreline, every winter we have the debris from the L.A. River washing up on the shoreline and there's just piles of trash. Low-impact development is being seen as the long-term solution for that sort of thing both in terms of keeping pollution out of the ocean but also augmenting our scarce water supplies.

What it means is when rain falls on your property, you have created systems and practices to capture that water, whether for reuse like in a rain barrel or by directing it to watering landscaping, or even making a point to let it soak into the ground so that it makes it back into groundwater. It's a dual benefit. You're creating this new water source, which is this logical thing of, "Hey, all this rain falls."

Even though people don't think it rains much in Southern California, there is in fact on average 12 inches of rain. Right now it turns into a waste product and contributes to ocean and water pollution, but it could be offsetting our water usage when we're importing all of this water from the Colorado River and Northern California. About 40 percent of what we use as a city falls as rain every year. It would be a long time before we could capture it all . . . We might never be able to capture it all. But when you think about rain falling on the property and you can create systems where each property turns into a sponge, you can hold onto all that water to use and prevent that water from carrying pollution to the ocean. But that is a big long-term retrofit and that's where my green job trainees come in. These are things that they can be doing over the long term and retrofitting the city property by property.

LBBJ: What are things residents can do to help make a more sustainable Long Beach?

Rich: One thing right off the bat is stop watering your lawn. Kill your lawn and turn it into a drought-tolerant or native landscape that will ultimately survive without being watered at all.

Reynolds: And it will save you money on your water bill.

Rich: Right. So that's one thing.

Reynolds: Another thing is kind of doing the same thing internally for your home for energy. Make the simple energy retrofits. There are lots of rebates out there. We have a \$500 rebate through the city. Southern California Edison has a handful of rebates. There are even sprinkler rebates through our water department and the Metropolitan Water District. There are a lot of federal tax incentives as well for folks who do this. Changing out lights, getting rid of inefficient devices, getting tank-less or solar hot water heaters, whole house fans . . . there's a lot of things out there that you can do just to make your home more efficient. It's individual action that will reign supreme on these because everyone's got to do his or her part. ■