

How a 'one-horse town' grew green

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In April, the mayor of Purcellville, Va., was surprised when his town won a national award for sustainability.

Since taking office in 2006, he had worked with community leaders to protect more than 1,400 acres of undeveloped land and spurred the creation of an active environmental committee; but when Purcellville was selected as the most sustainable small town across 40 states, Robert Lazaro Jr. says, it was an unexpected honor.

The award was presented by the electronics company Siemens AG and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Business Civic Leadership Center. Neither presenter seemed to care that the 7,700-person town had virtually no solar installations, no wind farm and no renewable energy infrastructure.

Instead, they said it was Purcellville's sustainable use of land and natural resources that impressed them.

Located just east of the Blue Ridge Mountains and about 50 miles northwest of Washington, Purcellville is in one of the fastest-growing regions of the country. From 2000 to 2003, the population of Loudoun County, Va., increased faster than that of any other county in the United States -- turning many rural communities there, like Purcellville, into overnight commuter suburbs.

According to Lazaro, the population of the 3-square-mile town has quadrupled since 1990, and overdevelopment has become a sensitive issue for residents.

"We've seen a lot of changes over time," said 54-year-old Shaileen Backman, who moved to Purcellville in the 1980s.

She says it was a "one-horse town" back then, and she was fond of it that way.

"When we came here, we liked what was here. ... We didn't want it to be something different," said Kathy McGlaufflin, 57, another longtime Purcellville resident who runs an environmental education program in Washington.

Newcomers seek smallness, sustainability

The sentiments of residents like McGlaufflin and Backman have been a driving force behind Purcellville's award-winning initiatives to conserve land, water and local character, Lazaro says.

One of the town's first steps toward sustainability happened eight years ago, when leaders issued an ordinance preventing the construction of new buildings larger than 10,000 square feet -- effectively keeping out megastores like Walmart and Target. A few years later, a "historic overlay district" was established to protect traditional architecture and barns from being torn down by developers.

In 2009, more than 1,000 acres of Purcellville's watershed was placed into a conservation easement to prevent development around the area's streams and reservoir, which provide nearly half the town's drinking water.

To lessen the growing population's water use, the local government began offering rebates for low-flow toilets and washing machines and created rain barrel workshops to show residents how to collect rainwater for use in their gardens. The town's water bills were also put on a tiered system, so the more water a household consumed, the more it was charged per gallon. And every homeowner was given a low-flow shower head and waterproof timer to encourage shorter showers.

"I'm competitive, so I want to beat my timer and get done before the time runs out," said Ciara Bucci, a senior at Loudoun Valley High School, who has started showering in less than five minutes since her family received the free timer.

Lazaro says these conservation efforts have saved at least 4 million gallons of water since 2008, and considering that Purcellville pays a high price to treat its water supply, the programs have also saved the town a substantial amount of money.

Walking downtown -- who knew?

"One of the biggest myths in the environmental movement is that it's all about renewable energy, but it's not," said Anne Alba, the vice chairwoman of Purcellville's environmental committee. "Conservation is just as important, and conserving is inexpensive."

Alba believes Purcellville won the sustainability prize because it wove a "tapestry" of initiatives together, instead of focusing on one thing.

For example, the town recently placed 2 miles of sidewalk along the main road, which has allowed residents to easily walk downtown for the first time in 30 years.

"Things like that are all part of sustainability," Lazaro said. "If you can walk or bike and are not taking the car, that's environmentally friendly."

The town has also started hosting a green expo every spring, built a community garden, installed numerous light-emitting diode streetlights to conserve energy and planted hundreds of trees throughout the community.

"We've done things that make sense ... based on what citizens have been saying," Lazaro said.

"It's not like, 'Oh, our goal is to reduce greenhouse gases by 20 percent.' How do you do that?"

In spite of these efforts, many residents still feel the town hasn't done enough.

Chains, change and trains lurk outside

On the drive into Purcellville, some of the first landmarks are a McDonald's, a BP gas station, a Kentucky Fried Chicken and a large Harris Teeter grocery store under construction -- a notable exemption to the town's 10,000-square-foot rule.

Before the chain stores and developments moved in, "it was just such a sweet little town," recalled a longtime resident who asked to remain anonymous. "They're trying to make it easier for businesses to come in. Money is always the bottom line."

"I don't think it's very green to bring in drive-through fast food restaurants," said McGlaufflin, although she believes that "the town has good intentions."

Several residents are fiercely opposed to a Washington Metrorail extension under construction that will bring the city's public transportation system within 20 miles of Purcellville -- potentially furthering the town's explosive growth.

"The more you make transportation like that available, the more people move out because they can take that transportation to get to work," said Paul Miller, a Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy board member, who is concerned about the rapid habitat loss happening in Northern Virginia.

Lazaro acknowledges that business interests have grown in recent years and that the town has, inevitably, changed, but he believes positively influencing those changes is what counts.

"As Kermit the Frog says, 'It's hard being green,'" McGlaufflin said. "There are no simple solutions.

"Critical decisions going into the future are going to determine how green we really are."

Purcellville Wins National Sustainability Award

The Town of Purcellville Wednesday was one of three winners of the national U.S. Chamber Business Civic Leadership Center and Siemens Corporation Sustainable Community Award. Mayor Bob Lazaro was in Atlanta, GA, to receive the award.

Town leaders and staff had been anxiously waiting to hear the results after being told Purcellville was a finalist in the small community category several weeks ago.

The town of almost 8,000 was in good company, named as winner along with Chicago, IL, in the large community category, and Santa Monica, CA, in the mid-size category.

In the announcement of the 2012 Siemens Sustainable Community Award winner, Purcellville was cited for its “proactive use of land and natural resources. Additionally, Purcellville’s ‘Go Green’ goals are now part of the town’s comprehensive sustainability plan.” The citation also stated, “Purcellville thrives economically and has received recognition from Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell and former Virginia Governor Tim Kaine for its sustainability efforts.”

The three communities were selected from among 132 nominees in 40 states, each noted for their focus on a multi-disciplinary approach to sustainability, one that has positively impacted local businesses and enhanced the quality of life among their residents, according to the organization.

Siemens representative Alison Taylor praised the winners for their success in having used sustainability as a mechanism to improve overall community success, as opposed to stand-alone programs pursuing specific environmental outcomes, and cited a holistic approach as a truer indicator of a community’s sustainability.

“I am very proud of the town,” Lazaro said, noting the award had recognized the town’s multi-branched approach to sustainability goals. They included the town’s water rebate programs; its investment in its historic buildings; the almost 1,300 acres placed in permanent conservation easement in the town’s watershed; townwide recycling program; go green measures; the installation of LED street lights; and partnering of preservation efforts with economic development in the downtown.

The town doesn’t just get the prestige that goes with the Siemens award, it also will receive \$20,000 worth of trees from the Alliance for Community Trees, according to the mayor. “They’ll work with us to pick the type of trees suitable for Northern Virginia,” he said, noting there are plenty of places around town that could do with more tree canopy, such as A Street between 32nd and 20th along Locust Grove and Hirst Farm.

Siemens Corporation is a United States subsidiary of global electronic and electrical engineering powerhouse Siemens AG. The Business Civic Leadership Center is the U.S. Chamber of Commerce’s chief resource and voice for businesses’ social and philanthropic interests with a mission to advance the positive role of business in society. The two organizations created the awards program in 2008 to recognize U.S. communities that take proactive steps to improve quality of life, be stewards of their environments and increase the ability to sustain a successful community for future generations.

The panel of judges included five academic, community development and media professionals. Other finalists, included Boston, MA; Jersey City, NJ; Las Vegas, NV; Middleton, WI; River Falls, WI; and Riverside, CA.