

Green Umbrella: A network for embracing the big ideas

BY ANDREA TORTORA
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By pooling resources and collaborating on best practices, the nonprofit Green Umbrella group is driving improvements to the economic vitality and quality of life in the Greater Cincinnati region.

Green Umbrella is the backbone to a broad-based array of organizations, giving structure to individual and group efforts focused on all things green. The goal is to achieve greater success by working collectively rather than individually, said Bill Hopple, Green Umbrella president and executive director of the Cincinnati Nature Center.

"We want to create platforms to help it all come together," Hopple said.

MEETING OF MINDS

Started in 1998 by nature organizations focused on land preservation, Green Umbrella was reborn in March as the go-to group for Tri-State sustainability.

The new Green Umbrella worked with Cincinnati's Agenda 360 initiative and Northern Kentucky's Vision 2015 to create a collective impact model that ties together many regional goals related to environmental, social and economic concerns.

It may have been a fated match. When Green Umbrella sought a grant from the Greater Cincinnati Foundation, it was asked how its goals aligned with Agenda 360 and Vision 2015.

That prompted Hopple to call a meeting—at the same time that Agenda 360 Executive Director Mary Stagaman and Vision 2015 President Bill Scheyer were discussing how to kick-off a regional green plan.

"We asked him to consider embracing a bigger idea," said Mary Stagaman, Agenda 360 executive director.

The three got to work with their respective boards and other constituents, using the collective impact model that has made the Strive education initiative so successful. They would advance regional sustainability by using Green Umbrella as the anchor for the work to come.

Scheyer, a founding member of the original iteration of Green Umbrella and past board

member, said what happened is "the perfect example of how making commitments to alignment can work."

"Once we all got together, all the pieces fit and we can now do a program envisioned in the past that while be a driving force for the future."

COLLECTIVE IMPACT

The organizational model is just what Hopple had in mind five years ago, when he started thinking about taking Green Umbrella to the next level.

"We were looking to create a network for communication, so that if someone new joined a nature group or wanted to learn all about us, Green Umbrella would connect them," Hopple said.

He envisioned something parallel to ArtsWave, which is the connector group for the region's arts organizations.

"I've always believed Cincinnati arts are as strong as they are for a city of this size because 90 years ago people said lets work together," Hopple said.

Green Umbrella will be the place people go to find out about recreation opportunities, places to volunteer, how to recycle, how to reduce carbon footprints and available alternative transportation modes.

It will be a resource, Hopple said, but it still is under construction.

After a kick-off meeting in March, working groups are developing regional goals under the collective impact model of having a common agenda, using a shared measurement system, supporting mutually reinforcing activities and maintaining continuous communication.

Focus areas include renewable energy, waste reduction, green space, outdoor recreation and nature education, local food, transportation, green jobs and watershed management, to name a few.

"We are building the airplane as we are flying it," Hopple said. "Anyone can get engaged. We want the people to own it and help us build it."

PUBLIC, BUSINESS ENGAGED

Partnerships already are underway. Using a grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the city of Cincinnati's Office of Environmental Quality and Green Umbrella are championing region-wide efforts to reduce carbon emissions by 300,000 tons before October 2012.

Individuals and groups can join the campaign at whatsyourgreenumbrella.org. To date, 1,000 people have signed up, out of a goal of 30,000, said Larry Falkin, director of the Office of Environmental Quality.

Emission reductions achieved by Dec. 1 were equal to 1,146.9 tons, for a savings of \$359,985.

"The place to start the discussion is with the observation that if we here in Cincinnati keep doing things the way we are, we as a community will fail," Flaking said. "Other people aren't standing still."

What's Your Green Umbrella is a feel-good, fun way to encourage people to make even small changes that bring a visible impact. Those who sign up can win prizes and join teams that foster fun competition.

"We need to be making progress and making changes and keeping pace and getting out in front," Falkin said. "We are building Cincinnati in a way that even, though resources will become more expensive, we can live a great lifestyle here because we are prepared for it."

Business is on board, too. The Greater Cincinnati Green Business Council formed in June. Led by Cintas, the group is a collaboration of large companies dedicated to promoting sustainability while increasing the bottom line. The group includes representatives from Procter & Gamble, Mitsubishi Electric Automotive America, Melink Corporation, Macy's, Luxottica Group and Fifth Third Bank.

The Business Council shares best practices and works on ways to drive sustainable development in the region. Its goal is to push Greater Cincinnati employers to be sustainability leaders and is working on ways to educate businesses on how to do it by targeting the triple bottom line: people,

planet and profit.

Falkin, who helped start a similar group when he worked in Kansas City, said Cincinnati's Green Business Council is a key piece of the region's sustainability puzzle.

"The big employers know greens needs to be part of their business strategy and they know how to do it," he said.

But smaller and medium sized companies are sometimes too focused on their core business.

"The council coming together is not so much for the big guys; it's more for the thousands of smaller companies who need help."

MODEL FOR SUCCESS

That kind of support is exactly what those behind Green Umbrella hope to see more of in the future.

As the group becomes more robust, Hopple anticipates more collaboration and member benefits.

A new Green Umbrella website will feature pages for each member organization. Membership dues will fund the hiring of a full-time director sometime in 2012.

Interim director Brewster Rhoads said Green Umbrella's potential can rebrand the region as a place where young professionals and young families, as well as older residents, can live a low-impact existence with ready access to nature and green jobs.

Green Umbrella's leaders will be working to make all of these things a reality.

"It adds value to the roster of organizations doing great work," Stagaman said.

Scheyer said he expects the synergistic effects to keep building. And he believes a focus on the bottom line will ensure success.

"We will all derive benefits. We will save dollars, reduce use of resources and we can then direct that benefit for use on behalf of the community," Scheyer said.

If the region is successful, Greater Cincinnati will have more outdoor recreation, pristine waterways, cleaner air, more efficient buildings and homes that save people money, making it a far more appealing place to live, work and raise a family.

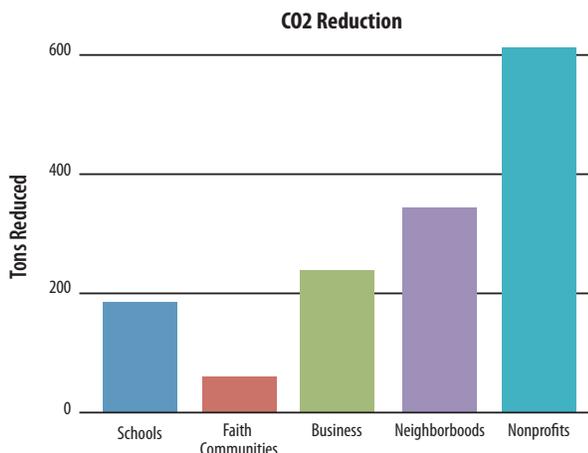
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More than 1,000 people have joined the "What's Your Green Umbrella" campaign to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. The initiative's website, whatsyourgreenumbrella.org, lets participants track their progress, see how much money they are saving, get involved in some friendly competition and earn prizes. The effort is funded by an EPA grant. Leaders from the city and Green Umbrella hope Cincinnati's model is replicated elsewhere. Check out the website to get frequent updates and see the biggest contributors.

WHAT'S YOUR GREEN UMBRELLA CO2 EMISSION REDUCTIONS: TOTAL CAMPAIGN IMPACT



Emission reduction
1308.4 tons

Money saved
\$400,616.81

December 7, 2011