

## A vision of many voices

A recently registered Sustainable Maryland community, the City of Frostburg is now deciding what manner of sustainability progress its Green Team should direct its efforts towards. Sustainable Maryland's Leadership Training on metrics was perhaps an unlikely place to figure out how to develop a vision of its ideal future. The Leadership Training, titled *Measuring What Matters*, consisted of a full-day workshop held at three locations across Maryland in November, totaling 75 participants. Sustainable Maryland chose this year's topic to encourage metrics tracking in municipalities of all types, both to monitor progress and motivate improvement.

But Frostburg's vision begins with its Green Team members. Woody Getz, Commissioner of Public Works and Green Team Co-Chair, has his own high aims for Frostburg. He has been living in the same home in Frostburg for the past 30 years, having taught at the University before serving on the city council. He can proudly say much about the city's lively Main Street business district. His hope is for Frostburg to become a "destination for sustainability" that attracts the sustainability-minded from across the region.

Another Green Team member, Jenna Linhart, arrived more recently; she moved in just over four years ago with her now-husband for his studies. Though she expected just a temporary stay, it turned out her husband would be hired at the University and they would settle long-term. Jenna, too, developed a sense of connection to Frostburg during the past few years. She is charmed by its college-town feel and outdoorsy culture. She's recognized a tide away from traditional big-box business in favor of local, often environmentally-conscious small operations founded by young people. She has come to feel a greater tendency towards involvement as well. With a bit of hesitation, she says, "I'm not exactly sure how to put it, but it's kind of like we're already able to make a difference just by living and working here," as a young professional in a small, growing community. That sense of playing a part in the community has inspired her to take a more active role in bettering the city, including participating on the Green Team.

The Green Team, then, has drive, and it has the beginning of an ambitious vision. The remainder of that picture, as it decided after Woody and Jenna attended the Leadership Training, will be filled in by the rest of the Frostburg community. The Green Team will survey the residents to find out which sustainability projects and issues Frostburg residents find most important and get an idea of their attitudes and behaviors related to specific issues. Sustainable Maryland especially recommends the latter type of assessment for its helpfulness early on in the process, listed on its certification scheme as a "Community Barriers and Benefits Assessment."

"If we had done our community assessment already," Woody says, "we'd probably be going like, 'Oh, I wish we'd had known that stuff back then.'" Collecting data has always been a

part of the Green Team's plan, but it was when Jenna shared what she learned at the Leadership Training with her teammates that it entered the team's conversation. Ideas from the workshop and from the team's own ensuing discussion will direct its activities, including heavily influencing the survey project. One Green Team member, a Frostburg State University professor, noted for example how misleading it can be to grade assignments using only numeric scores, and now the team has decided to seek both quantitative and qualitative assessments. Jenna has decided that after collecting the data, she would like to make the results known to the public along with the Green Team's responses to those results. Citing the typical contemporary experience of questionnaires that amount to mere one-way communication, she wants to ensure that respondents know that the Green Team is "listening and very open," and that their perspectives are truly being taken into account.

Perhaps the most significant effect of the Leadership Training is that surveying the community has taken on a connotation of social equity among the group: to solicit feedback is to value the needs and opinions of the residents. From the discussion on metrics came another on inclusivity. The Green Team, realizing its own perspective is limited to the diversity of its own members, hopes the survey will help involve inadequately-represented segments of the population in decision-making.

Frostburg's first community garden has already demonstrated the need to be aware of inadvertent exclusion. A father and son-in-law on the Green Team were among those who in 2016 established the garden on the lot Frostburg bought from a local church. It turned out the father-in-law's wheelchair-bound wife had difficulty crossing the lawn to enter the garden. He found a resourceful solution: an industrial belt laid across the grass could accommodate her wheelchair. She now cultivates a bed raised to tabletop height. Ideally, the survey will help avoid overlooking potential beneficiaries in the future.



The Green Team expects to be guided by such a vision as the survey will reflect from the many voices that answer it. Since the City of Frostburg enters the Sustainable Maryland program with quite a few sustainability features already in place, it isn't too concerned with its ability to meet the requirements for certification. Instead, the Green Team can focus on making beneficial changes large and small as would interest the residents and the well-being of the community long-term. The questionnaire would also ideally serve as an advertisement for the Green Team, bringing news of the city's sustainability programs to those who haven't heard and possibly attracting new community members to the Team.

Sustainable Maryland is proud to furnish the basis of a productive discussion and wise decision-making to come.