

Brad Roos, Sustain Rockford: Part 2

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Haley: Hello, welcome to the Green Exploration: Rockford podcast. My name is Haley Dahl, and today I'll be meeting again with Brad Roos from Sustain Rockford to continue our previous discussion regarding sustainability in the Rockford region. ***Intro Music*** So for the sake of time, I'm going to continue moving forward through our questions. We've kind of touched on this, but I would like to know how you define environmental challenges in Rockford. And what are the parameters of them?

Brad: Well, first of all, it's a huge topic.

Haley: Yeah, for sure.

Brad: So if you're talking about environmental, versus the other elements of sustainability, if we just, if we just think about that, I think it's fairly evident from what just happened in Texas, that reliable clean energy is something that every community needs, as well as a properly functioning infrastructure. So figuring out how we can do that better, is really important. I think specifically, Sustain Rockford was one of the only 10 Grassroots Educators statewide for the Illinois Solar For All program two years ago. And so our job was to educate and advocate for people to get solar through the Illinois Solar For All program, which sought to, to reach and, and help people get solar, who were in not-for-profits, who were people with lower incomes, or people who lived in so-called environmental justice communities, communities that had been adversely affected by environmental issues. The biggest challenge that we had, and it was a spectacular program. You know, in some cases, basically, the, the program would almost pay you to get solar, and then you get the savings on top of that. And the biggest problem that we had was when that people simply just weren't tuned into it, they didn't understand it. They, for one thing, if someone says there's no such thing as a free lunch, you know, you're offering a free lunch, and they're saying there's no such thing. So they're, they're suspicious, you know, initially, right. And there have been instances, when electricity was deregulated been instances of fraud, where people you know, came to your door and say, "Hey, buddy, want to buy some solar," you know, and they sell you a bill of goods, and then they're gone after your check clears or something. So, unfortunately, that, that

had happened. And it poisons people's minds about the viability of something even though it was massively protected by Consumer Protection factors built into the program. But solar is complicated. If you're going to have it on your property, it's complicated. It has, you know, there's issues with your own wiring issues with the structural integrity of your roof, there's issues of the orientation of your building, and any shading that may be involved. And we also found it very difficult to get installers to work with individuals, for example, because there was more money in larger systems like community solar systems, and so on. So we had a hard time with that. Interestingly, Champaign, Illinois, went absolutely gangbusters. They were getting project after project after project on nursing homes and on health care facilities and not-for-profits and senior housing and all this stuff. Now, I was thinking I was practically screaming and saying what is wrong with our community that we are not taking advantage of this? And you know, a lot of it is just readiness. Are people ready? Are they prepared? And do they have a trustworthy source? And then let me put it this way, we were prohibited as a grassroots educator from advocating for any particular solar installer. We were not allowed to do that for pretty obvious reasons. You know, it's consumer protection stuff. But if we'd had a relationship with a particular high integrity installer, we could have essentially had a one stop shopping, we could have, you know, helped answer all of their questions very quickly, and get them moving right along. I suspect that's what Champaign did, and some of the other communities that were more successful than that. So let's just say project readiness, you know, having people ready to hear these things. That's, that's one thing. Another factor would be. And we, we met with a leader of a neighborhood organization in a neighborhood that has a majority of the people with lower incomes. And he is hearing about some of these things and he's saying, you know, that's all well and good, but I got people who can't pay their rent.

Haley: Yeah.

Brad: I got people that can't put food on the table for their kids. You know, how in the world can we put these things together? Well, of course there is a relationship. If I can save you a ton of money in your electric bill, you might be able to find more money for your rent. But that's not top of mind. That may be not what people are thinking about. You know, what do they say, "When you're up to your neck in alligators, it's hard to remember that your job is to drain the swamp." The notion is that the urgent can crowd out the important at times, not to in any way diminish the very real problems that exist in terms of the economic stability and viability for many people in our community in the Rockford community, that's a huge thing. They're, they're not interested in solar, if they can't see their way through to making it from day to day, they're focused on that. So you can't, you can't separate those things. Interestingly enough, then, what that means is that, to some extent, solving the environmental challenges of any community is always going to engage the social challenges of that community. You can't make it an engineering project only. There are other factors involved. So I'd say that's part of it. I'd say another part. And I'm, I'll be blunt about this. Policy makers and the people that, that generate systems and programs and policies for any community and, and particularly those that might impact people with lower incomes, the people who generate the policies almost always don't live in the neighborhoods, where the people that are going to be impacted by those policies are.

Haley: So they're like detached, essentially.

Brad: Out of sight, out of mind.

Haley: Yeah.

Brad: They don't see it, or they can't quite feel it. You know, and I'm not saying that's always true, it's certainly not always true. There are notable exceptions. But too often, I think, people don't see things as complicated as they truly are, as complex as they truly are. Because they don't live in the communities that are fundamentally affected. And I'm talking about the social issues as well. So, so there's that. On the clean air, clean water, and so on. I think, interestingly, industry still doesn't embrace solar the way they could, or wind. You know, there's evidence that there is an increasing, there's an accelerating rate in which solar is being implemented, for all the reasons that you already know, including the lower costs as going forward. And as there's a lot of people that just won't do it until somebody else does it. But it's happening. And so I think getting the word out. And also, there are ways to do group buys to make it more affordable if we all work together. And so that can be done. I'm certainly not an expert on all the fields. I know that the flooding that we've had in the Keith Creek is a consequence of initially, the Keith Creek was just what it was, it was just a waterway. And yet, as we designed and developed land in the watershed, and made so many impermeable surfaces, parking lots in particular, but other things too. As a result of all of that, and the types of plants that we put including grass, which doesn't do a very good job of wicking the water into the aquifer, we just didn't think about it so much. And then when flooding happened, well, it generally happened to somebody else, somebody who was unfortunate enough to live in that part of town. So there again, you have the sort of social thing, and social equity piece. But clearly there's a growing awareness, watershed treatment and how we treat the waterways in our communities is not only important, but it's also a great opportunity to bring back beauty and as well as function and that, that is growing. And it's growing both in terms of the Keith Creek and the Kent Creek. So I'm encouraged by that. And I know that there's a lot of attention being paid to that. Transportation Systems, I know that the Region One Planning Council is working hard on plans and developing plans to put charging stations throughout the community for electric vehicles, that will be crucial. That's the crucial infrastructure that will be needed if we're going to be successful in bringing electric vehicles onto the scene. In addition to that, I think there also needs to be more attention paid to non-vehicular transport, which is a growing area of interest and awareness and focus for most communities, including ours. So how do we encourage people to walk or ride their bikes? I was really very pleased when the city of Rockford's traffic engineer said at a meeting two years ago, when somebody in our Midtown neighborhood where I live said, "How can we encourage the businesses in the community to stay and to thrive when we lack parking?" And the traffic engineer said, "Well, of course what we want to see is we want to see less traffic. And we want to see more people using either non-vehicular transport, so walking or riding a bicycle or something or using public transportation, so you don't need a parking lot." So it would be nice to think that in some distant future parking lots become sort of anachronistic, who needs them? Along with that used car lots, you know, both of which occupy huge areas of land and have impermeable surfaces. So those contribute to, you know, not only efficiency in terms of the use of fuels and, and energy, but also impact our water conservation. So that's a good thing. The parking lot at the New Belgium Brewery in Fort Collins, Colorado, where they make Fat Tire beer, is all permeable pavement.

Haley: Oh, wow.

Brad: The whole parking lot, there is all permeable pavement. And if you rode your bike, or a skateboard to work, you can park your bike right there at the door, at the entrance to the you know, the employee entrance. If you drove an electric car, you can park pretty close to the entrance. But if you drove a real fuel guzzler, you will park as far away as possible. Because that's their policy. They're encouraging people to operate and drive fuel efficient vehicles, hopefully electric more even than gasoline powered vehicle. So I mean, there are policies that people can take, that can impact these things at the private corporate level, as well as at the city policy level.

Haley: Yeah, I remember when I went to Rock Valley College 'cause I went there for a year. And they had a similar thing where the closest parking spots were reserved specifically for electric slash hybrid cars. I do remember that.

Brad: Yeah, yeah,

Haley: I always thought that was cool.

Brad: Yeah. And of course, if you put the charging stations there, then that pretty much cinches it, doesn't it?

Haley: Definitely.

Bead: Yeah. But I think that the key will be a, a great piece of the puzzle will be to develop a comprehensive sustainability slash resiliency plan that people pay attention to, that it's community developed and community engaged. Here's a story for you that shocked me, when Sustain Dane began up in Madison, for 10 years they held coffees in people's homes to talk about the principles that are in a book called *The Natural Step*, which is almost philosophical. It is philosophical at its roots in terms of how we should treat the earth and so on. They had 1000 coffees over a 10 year period to help people understand what the principles of sustainability and proper consideration for the earth really are. And they built such a groundswell of support, that when they went into existence and started advocating for a sustainability plan in Madison, they already had such a strong grassroots level of support that it was a slam dunk. And so now, you know, both the city and the county have those in place, and they're very robust. They have a Climate Action Plan for the county. I think all of the snow plows at the airport in Madison are biogas operated. And they have a plan for getting to zero carbon. Net, net carbon, net zero carbon by I don't know what year it is, might be 2030, or 2040. But that's robust planning. That's not just pie in the sky stuff, "We'll do the best we can." No, they're setting goals, then achieving goals. So you got to think that those 1000 coffees. There was a point at which, and I don't know if it's still true, but there was a point at which if you became an employee for the city of Madison, regardless of what job you did, you went through training in *The Natural Step*.

Haley: Yes.

Brad: Everybody. Everybody had to understand that. That is wonderful.

Haley: Yes.

Brad: That helps everybody. It's not optional, to understand your place in the world and how it all works. You've got to do that if you're going to work here.

Haley: So it sounds like, to me, that the biggest environmental challenge that Rockford has been struggling with is that there's a lack of plan and a lack of education that is slowing the implementation of sustainable infrastructure that would support this plan. And to me, when you were talking about the coffees and stuff, I just thought, like I said, that was beautiful, but it really did resonate with me because it seems like the key to sustainability is just connection: connection between our fellow human beings, but also a connection with nature itself. And, you know, especially with this pandemic, we're clearly struggling with connection with one another, we're severely struggling with connection with nature, especially if you look at urban communities, such as Rockford. There is so much gray infrastructure and people forget about that innate and inherent good connection that we're supposed to have with nature.

Brad: Let me say though, let me say that I think it's less, less an issue of availability than it is of the people thinking that this is important because I take a walk, and I did today, two mile loop that I take that takes me across the river, along the river, and then back again. And part of the walk that I take is through a wooded area that's on the east side of the river between the Chestnut Street and the Morgan Street bridges, just south of the Fordham dam. And I see eagles. And I see fishermen and I see all kinds of other birds and so on. I saw an Oriol last fall. And so I think you have to realize that this is something that we all need.

Haley: Yes.

Brad: And I'm not sure that everybody you know, knows that, or thinks that and I'm not sure how that happens. I want to say something about your summary of what the issues are. I really agree with what you said, I think you hit the high points. I think there are a lot of great things going on in the community, environmentally, you know, the LEED Platinum building for the water reclamation people, the solar panels people are putting on their buildings, the attention to the Keith Creek and the Kent Creek. And so, I think there's a lot of that. So there is a growing, let's say, a growing awareness and professionalism from people who are engineers and scientists who understand these things, conservationists and not-for-profits that are organized around them. So I think that awareness is there and growing. So that's a good thing. I also think that while there are a lot of plans that are driving some of these things, the thing that a sustainability plan could do is to help coordinate those things. And also by setting whole community goals in this area. You may be aware that Rockford has an on-going planning process called Transform Rockford.

Haley: Oh, yeah.

Brad: Have you heard of that Transform Rockford? Okay, well, when they rolled out their metrics system, that presenter looked right at me and said, Brad, I'm really sorry to say, but we don't have anything in our metrics about sustainability. And they don't. And they know that. So when you don't, "What gets measured is what gets done," is what some people say. If you're not keeping the metrics on it, you don't know what you're doing. So having some sustainability metrics is part of a sustainability plan. And then, of course, having goals. If you don't have any goals, then you just have good intentions. And we all know what that leads to. Here's a story in Dubuque that shows the interrelationship of those things. So they're a Star Rated Community, they're the only 4-Star Rated Community in the whole state of Iowa. There is no 5-Star. There are some in the country, but there are none in Iowa. They're the highest in terms of sustainability, highest rated community in Iowa. So that system comes with a scoring, you get scored every, every so many years, you get your score, and they realized that one of their scores that was kind of low and needed work was their economic stability, sustainability, and another was their social equity. So they sent out their economic development staff, to 60 companies, 60 large companies in the area, and they said, you know, "How's it going and how can we help?" And those companies said, "We've got jobs we can't fill because we don't have qualified people." They came back and they said, okay, so let's have a job fair. But let's make sure that the job fair is one where people who come can be directly connected to the trainers, people who can train them for those jobs, and then let's hold the employers feet to the fire and say, so if they get the training, you got to give them a real bonafide solid, serious interview. And so everybody agreed. So they had the job fair with the educational entities right there, present in the same room. They had 500 people come. They had a 98% success rate. 98% of the people that came, went through the training, got the jobs. 1% of the people that came said, I want more education, and 1% dropped out. And then they said okay, now, so that's economic sustainability. What about social equity? Let's look at the demographics of who came. Uh oh, not so good. Mostly white people.

Haley: Yeah.

Brad: So they said, let's, let's do it again, let's recruit minorities. So they did it again, 500 people predominantly minorities, 98% success rate, same success rate, which also said something to them about maybe what they thought would happen if they invited minorities, that it wouldn't work as well, but also that it did work. And they said explicitly, "We never would have thought of that if we didn't have a sustainability plan that linked, that said it's important for our community, not only to have economic sustainability, but also have social equity." And that we get scored on both of those and we pay attention and work towards raising those scores. So that's what a plan can do to people who have a growing awareness, but are operating primarily independently.

Haley: People have a tendency to think about our societal issues as so separate. They think about economic issues, they think about social justice issues, and then they think about environmental issues and people pigeonhole themselves into each one of those topics. And they're failing to realize that it's a complete holistic issue that you have to tackle all together because they affect one another. They are not something that just exists separately.

Brad: Well said.

Haley: Thank you. So moving on, I would like to know more about green infrastructure such as the EV charging stations, then you mentioned, you're talking about how Rockford wanted to push for more accessible public transit, Rockford has been implementing green spaces specifically. So as far as your knowledge, what infrastructure improvements have you seen or been a part of that has provided solutions to these environmental challenges that we've discussed in Rockford?

Brad: You're right in saying discussing it as far as my knowledge goes, which is not as far as others would be able to say. So I can speak in general. Rockford's—

Haley: That's fine.

Brad: Mass Transit District has recently purchased some hybrid buses, and so they're blue. And you can see him driving around. And they're proud of those. And they understand that that's important. I think that the Mass Transit District understands their role in social equity very well.

Haley: That's great.

Brad: They, they know who they serve, and that is people who are the working poor, let's say, or people with lower incomes. I ride the bus from time to time. And when I do, I readily recognize that most of the people who are on the bus are probably part of the essential working force, and are probably working at low wage shops, or maybe trying to go to school or something for more training. It's not like people who ride the L in Chicago, it would be, that would be a completely different subset of people. So I think the RMTD has a good understanding of who they're serving, and have tried to organize their routes accordingly. There's always room for improvement, they would readily admit that. I think that, as I said earlier, that there's a growing awareness of the importance of water conservation, and dealing with our waterways. Fortunately, there are some monies that can help with that. I'm pleased to see that I think that whatever area there's funding for tends to be the area where the work gets done on a higher level or a policy driven basis. You know, there's still some money for affordable housing that's coming through the state and the federal government, I think there's a growing awareness of the sophistication required in developing good housing because you're really talking about a social structure there. And you're doing what people call, some people call, social engineering. I expressed my opinions earlier to you about what I think is essential for high quality, mixed income housing, and that is people with middle and upper incomes need to want to be part of that housing, and need to want to be part of those communities, part of those neighborhoods. And in order for that to occur, that's, that's a moral thing. People's moral compass's drive them to that. And my question is always then is who's doing the talking about that? I wish there were more voices, more strong voices that were speaking to that. And so as that continues to grow, and I think the social turmoil that we're experiencing now is driving people to reevaluate just how do we do that. I know that the not-for-profit community, I'm a volunteer consultant with the Northern Illinois Center for Nonprofit Excellence. And they have had more and more calls for what they call DEI training, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, by their member non-profit organizations. And, and I know that even for-profit organizations are spending a lot more time focusing on how do we have a more diverse, equitable and inclusive workforce. So that's encouraging. Still, I think the moral

leadership in terms of how do we really love our neighbors needs to be much more clear, much more definite and much more present, persistent in our community and in every community for that to occur. That's my personal opinion.

Haley: I totally agree with you because I feel like a lot of our environmental issues, social justice issues, all of it comes down to people thinking about what's going to line their pockets more so than anything else, and they forget about how to properly love their neighbors, how to love their environment, because at the end of the day, that's what humanity is all about. You know, it's, it's about the connections you make with people and the connection you make with nature and if... strip humans of that, then what's left? That we're killing ourselves with that. So um...

Brad: Good for you, girl.

Haley: Thank you. I feel very strongly about these issues. I'm actually a civil engineering major at UIC. And I'm minoring in sustainable cities. So, you know, my goal is I would like to work in the field, engineering, and I really want to push for green infrastructure, like sponge city type, biolistic communities, because it's, it's that connection that we're missing. And we need to push for that. Because then if we have that, then with education and connection, then people are going to be a lot more susceptible to the necessary environmental policymaking that needs to be done to help reverse our negative effects that we've done in regards to climate change. Because, you know, you said earlier, how policymakers have a tendency to be detached from the communities and the issues that are going on. I think it's important for professionals to be involved in the planning and policy side of things. Because—

Brad: Yeah.

Haley: engineers, and architects and all that, like they have, at least this is what I want to bring to the table, is having that experience of working in the field to bring to the policy, instead of just having these abstract ideas. I want to also have that experience of how to implement those in the real world. So I guess my question, my last question would be, how has Rockford been prioritizing solutions to environmental challenges in BIPOC neighborhoods compared to other neighborhoods? Would you say they're doing a pretty good job and being inclusive across the community? Or is there still some disparity there?

Brad: I know that the Illinois Solar For All program, that we were a Grassroots Educator for, focused on low-income communities, however, the receptivity was low, because for all the reasons that we previously discussed. When you do social equity, with the notion of *'nothing for us without us'*, then community engagement is crucial. My gut feeling without a whole lot of data, Haley, is that when community leaders want to talk about sustainability issues, my friend Julian said, the neighborhood leader, it's really hard for people with lower incomes to listen to a conversation or be a part of a conversation about environmental factors when they're having a hard time making their ends meet financially. And so, showing the linkage of those things and showing economic advantage, as well as that sustainability is not just about let's put solar panels on your roof kind of thing. That turns out to be a

very important and very delicate question. Let me put it to you this way, Bill Gates recently said in a TV, televised interview, that the number of people that will be displaced as a result of climate change in the coming 10 or 20 years, will greatly exceed the number of people who have been killed in the pandemic and other things. Those will be people in coastal areas, those will be people who are subject particularly to wildfires, it's almost always going to fall on the backs of people who don't have much of a voice.

Haley: Yeah.

Brad: And when they don't have a voice, and they don't have economic power, then they don't get paid attention to and we're all sad that it's happening to them. But gee, that's, it's not my everyday world, so—

Haley: Yeah.

Brad: I'm going to go live my life the way I have been before, so yeah, and I, I guess that policy, thought leaders and moral leaders need to help us all recognize that we have to live our lives day-to-day in such a way as to pay attention to the people that we can't see who are impacted by what we do. And help us see how that is, not just, what do we call it? *Educated self-interest*.

Haley: No, I, I definitely agree. Gotta love the neighbors even if you don't see them. So I believe this could be the good place to wrap up. Thank you so much for your time. I've really, really enjoyed this conversation.

Brad: I'm excited for you, for what you're doing and your future and, and it's encouraging to me.

Haley: I think now would be a good time to wrap up part two of this episode. ***Outro Music*** As always, I would love to thank Brad Roos for sharing his valuable insight during this discussion. I would also like to thank anyone listening in on this podcast. I really appreciate your support of Green Exploration: Rockford. All I ask of you is to take whatever you learn from this series and consider how you, as an individual, can be a contributor to a sustainable future in your day-to-day lives and communities. And don't forget to not only show Mother Earth some love, but your fellow humans as well, each and every one of them, because all humans deserve to live in a quality environment. My name is Haley Dahl and I am signing off. Stay green and stay exploring, Rockford.