

Robert Wilhelmi & Kyle Saunders, City of Rockford: Part 2

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Rockford, neighborhood, brownfields, city, community, people, projects, active transportation, residents, infrastructure, investments, improvements, promote, property

Haley: Hello, my name is Haley Dahl and welcome to another episode of *Green Exploration: Rockford*. Today, I'm speaking with Robert Wilhelmi the Brownfields Redevelopment Specialist and Kyle Saunders, the Director of Public Works, both working for the city of Rockford, Illinois. We will continue discussing Rockford environmental issues and how the City has been working towards a more sustainable future during part two of this episode. ***Intro Music***

Kyle: I was just going to start your next question about kind of where we're shifting our focus in the future in terms of, kind of, some of our, kind of, more strategic views around sustainability and certainly environmentalism. So, we, in each of our groups, I think we're doing a really good job looking forward, so our street, water and engineering group. In our engineering group, we're certainly looking and we have the Complete Streets ordinance, several years ago, so obviously, we're looking at our design standards, not just from a vehicular transportation standpoint, we're certainly looking at all modes of transportation. And, you know, we're kind of embracing that New Urbanism field, you know, as it relates to, you know, the wider the road doesn't mean the better the road, right, trying to kind of limit some of those pavement sections, which certainly is more sustainable from an initial cost perspective, from a lifecycle cost perspective, as well as traffic calming, speed management, and a level of comfort for your pedestrians and bicyclists that are that are also using that rose. So we're certainly looking at, kind of that, that we're raising that New Urbanism design standard. Also looking at a lot of our mix designs, and looking at how we can best utilize reclaimed materials, because that's something that obviously is really important. Helps kind of recycle some of those, you know, other, you know, otherwise just disposed of materials in a landfill, and, obviously, bring some of those unit prices down. So we're certainly excited to see that kind of come into the fold in engineering. And then the last big thing in engineering is being prepared for electric vehicles. We just, as a region, participated in an EV readiness study. So looking at, obviously, both the policy and the infrastructure side to see how we can best position ourselves to handle that, you know, that 2035, 2040, if not sooner, move towards exclusive electric vehicles. So, you

know, we're certainly looking at it from a city standpoint, in terms of how we can kind of lower those barriers to entry in terms of the electric vehicle market for our residents, but also looking at the infrastructure side. We just conducted a five year parking fund capital plan, that certainly contemplated where the best spots for EV charging stations would be, so we're certainly as a community wanting to make sure that we're playing a role and seeing that thing move forward. On the water side, really excited about kind of how we're dipping into renewable energy, we do have a solar panel array and one of our large 5 million gallon concrete reservoirs, that certainly helps kind of defray some of those electrical costs and electrical consumption. We do participate in a energy curtailment program through CoMed, so obviously, trying to shed some of our electrical demand on the grid whenever we can to kind of help them, obviously, balance the needs throughout their system. And then we're really looking at possibly the addition of hydroelectric generators on some of our larger reservoirs. So again, trying to look at different ways that we can decrease our energy consumption and certainly our energy costs. So, you know, after salary and benefits, electricity is our biggest operating expense in our water group, so anything that we can do to kind of pick away at that is certainly going to help us in the long run. And then lastly, in our street group, I talked a little bit about forestry, but, you know, street division has a lot of different sections operating under it. Our property group is actually looking at, they're the ones that maintain all of our city owned properties. They've actually been participating in ComEd, Nicore, all the different energy efficiency programs. So making sure that, you know, we've got the most efficient fixtures, mechanicals, and just systems within our buildings to make sure that, you know, we're doing our part and certainly decreasing that, that carbon footprint. And then really excited, we're actually right now in the final stages of securing some pretty significant grant funding to replace, or I'm sorry, to upgrade all of our non-LED streetlights throughout the city, so all of our high pressure sodium metal halide, all the city owned fixtures throughout that have not been upgraded to LED. And we're thinking that that's going to save us roughly \$105,000 a year in energy costs. So again, looking at it from a, you know, operational efficiency standpoint, but also kind of reducing the carbon footprint. We're really excited with what our groups looking for, towards the future. Sorry, I have to get off nine. But anything that you want me to expound on or anything.

Haley: Yeah, well, you've already kind of touched on what they wanted to do in regards to the green infrastructure and implementing that, but what are your thoughts in Rockford taking action towards implementing solutions to these environmental challenges, and more specifically, in BIPOC neighborhoods, has the implementation been inclusive?

Kyle: Yeah, so when you look at infrastructure renewal, you know, we, I think you talked about urban sprawl, and certainly urban decay, right, I mean, those are, those are pretty standard planning and environmental thought that has gone into how cities and communities have developed. We kind of have a unique overlap, where a lot of our, a lot of our older infrastructure is where we're focusing our investments, right. So, you know, when I talk about lead service line replacement, that's a huge initiative for us that certainly is implementing BIPOC populations. I think [the Metropolitan Planning Council did some work that showed that People of Color are impacted most in communities that have led service lines](#), just because of, obviously, kind of the location of the lead service lines relative to larger BIPOC population. So, you know, our lead service line replacement program is focused on improving those areas. I mean, our highest risk lead service lines are the ones again, that are either district through

maintenance activities or capital replacement efforts. And, to be honest, the large majority of our high risk watermain replacement is focused in areas of higher BIPOC population. So inherently, we're replacing lead service lines there. You know, another big project that I think of is our Ninth Street Two-Way Conversion, the Whitman Interchange. When I talk about those sustainable design principles, that's an area that right now that infrastructure is creating a barrier between the east and west sides of Rockford. So as we're looking at modernizing that interchange and reducing the pavement footprint, obviously, there's sustainable considerations, the Complete Street side, but creating that social accessibility of westside Connection to the downtown hospital at SwedishAmerican. Creating that social accessibility from the westside to, you know, the eastside and some of those downtown destinations. That's certainly something that with our infrastructure investment, we're addressing some of those social, those equity, those environmental concerns with a lot of the way that we're planning our projects. So I know those are just two examples, but again, you know, you can look at our sidewalk gap program that's looking to address some of the disconnection between kind of our active transportation attractors, i.e. our neighborhoods and those destinations, whether it be schools, whether it be shopping, whether it be, you know, health care, right, we're trying to kind of, we're trying to lower that barrier for our BIPOC population to be able to get to where they need to get. I look at that from our active transportation improvements, you know, the last, last year when we really evaluated our the level of funding that we spend on active transportation, we historically spent at a level of \$50,000 per year, we increase dthat to \$300,000 a year because we understood that communities our size, we're investing at one to \$2 per capita, so really what we're looking to do with, you know, improving that multi-use path, that on-street, that off-street, that sidewalk connection, throughout our city is making sure that we're connecting people to their destination, so we're really excited to see how all of this infrastructure investment is really making the life of our residents significantly better, so...

Haley: That's good to hear. Accessibility is definitely a big thing in regards to getting infrastructure to be inclusive because, you know, you see a lot even in Chicago, or like, you know, the [more affluent, whiter neighborhoods up on the north side, due to the City's history of segregating residents through Redlining and housing discrimination](#), they get all the overhauls in regards to public transit and things of that sort. And then the south, westside communities end up, you know, not receiving the same type of investments, so...

Kyle: So well, and that's, Haley, that's such a good point, I'm going to stay on for a minute, so I can bring up that point. So, you know, that's one thing that we identified in our 10-year Bikeway Implementation Study. There are a large number of people that use our active transportation networks, i.e. sidewalks, again, off-street, non-streer facilities for recreational purposes, right. There are a lot of people that do that, but there are a larger number of people that use that network out of necessity, right. I think a lot of people forget that some people don't have cars, some people don't have, you know, access to public transportation, so they need those networks to make sure that they have the means to get to where they need to go, so that was a huge focus for us. The other thing is our recent efforts on trying to close the digital divide, that accessibility to high speed internet, that accessibility to fiber optic networks. One thing that we're really, really proud of at the City of Rockford is that, I can't remember the exact month, but I think it was March of 2021, we actually entered into a master agreement with sci-fi networks to, they're looking to install a city-wide fiber optic network. So that they're literally going to

install fiber in front of every single house and every single business throughout the entire city of Rockford, so what that's going to allow is large scale connectivity to high speed internet throughout. And the scale of this project provides for lower, lower price points for that service, so and, you know, looking at, you know, obviously the possibility of those different internet service providers, looking at how we can incentivize and provide that connectivity to, you know, our low income residents because we understand that closing that digital divide is huge in ensuring that, you know, the socio economic conditions improve the connection and accessibility to everything throughout our city just really moves forward. So that's another huge thing that, again, we probably could talk for the next 25 to 30 minutes on, but again, just another example of how Rockford is pushing forward. And if all things go well, I think our plan is by 2024, we would have that city-wide fiber optic network lit and providing service to our residents, so we're really excited to see how that kind of pushes us forward as a community as well.

Rob: We also got the Trajectory Energy site under construction too, Kyle.

Kyle: Yeah.

Rob: Which is brownfields redevelopment project, it was an old, basically city-operated landfill and quarry and it sat vacant since the 70s. And I don't know the exact totals on how much is invested in that, but a company came in and they're doing a solar farm there and it's basically opening up the credits for low income individuals in the area. I think Rockford Housing Authority is going to be buying 10% of the energy off of that as well, so...

Haley: Well, Kyle, I'm assuming you have to hop off.

Kyle: Yes, I do. Thank you so much for the opportunity to meet with you, and it was really, really fun just kind of walking through. And we, there's a lot going on, so it's great...

Haley: Yeah.

Kyle: ...time to highlight it, so...

Haley: Thank you so much for, you know, sharing your insight knowledge. I really, really appreciate it.

Kyle: Absolutely. Thanks for thinking about me, Rob.

Rob: Thanks, Kyle.

Kyle: Bye.

Haley: Bye! Alrighty, so I guess, you know, backtracking a little bit, let's talk about the brownfields in regards to green infrastructure and how these improvements could, you know, benefit the brownfields situation in Rockford?

Rob: Obviously, you look at what we know about brownfields, and they are a huge, if not one of the major contributors, to environmental justice. And you look at these environmental justice areas, affected by brownfields and, you know, they are, they're these areas where large companies pulled up, left ship, left these sites, led to urban decay, surrounding neighborhoods affected negatively, property values go down and who's gonna be buying those houses living in there? They're gonna be, they're gonna be bought, they're gonna be turned into rentals. Obviously, with rentals, you have a high minority population. And not only is that those neighborhoods being affected by, you know, the blight, the economic challenges, lack of jobs, environmental health issues, so that's why we, you look at our brownfields investments, and our major investments are back into these sites surrounding these types of neighborhoods, and I look at southwest Rockford. I keep bringing that up, for example, it's good time to talk about that because we, so last year, we were awarded a Technical Assistance, Technical Assistance Grant from USEPA where they came in and we, basically the City was allowed to choose one neighborhood, and they were going to produce a revitalization strategy for that neighborhood. So we looked at, you know, the positive impacts that South Main has had there, you know, reconstruction of South Main streets, Embassy Suites, and some of the positives there, you know, we have this neighborhood, southwest Rockford neighborhood, that still is kind of lagged behind, because there's been all this investment in last 10 years in South Main and basically the commercial sites surrounding it, but nobody's really looked at these neighborhoods. So, you know, [we did this revitalization strategy to try to say, "Okay, how can we how can we continue redevelopment efforts on South Main Street route to benefit these neighborhoods and what it needs?" And it was, actually, very, very, very interesting study.](#) It reiterated a lot of things that, you know, we kind of had figured, but it just kind of, you know, put an explanation point on is, yeah, one of the biggest things was for that neighborhood was, there's no sense of communit. Nobody in that community that we interviewed, as far as the stakeholder interviews, you know, we asked them, "What would you say is, you know, the center point of your neighborhood?" And we got some scattered answers, and no one really could identify a certain key place or location that gives this neighborhood its identity, you know, kind of like a venue, like a city market or something along those lines. So, you know, it basically, it just pointed to everything back to that Barber-Colman site and saying that this needs to be redeveloped. This is, redevelop Barber-Colman is what's gonna make that neighborhood pop again. It's gonna give it a sense of identity again, it's gonna, you know, very diverse neighborhood, not only racially, but age wise, and it's something that could, you know, bring that neighborhood together. So, you know, it's kind of southwest Rockford. I know, it's kind of a poster child right now, for a lot of the stuff that we're talking about.

Haley: So then, would you say that Rockford has been pretty good about inclusively tackling these environmental challenges, especially in respect to brownfield?

Rob: Yes, in the past 20 years, yes.

Haley: That's good, that's good.

Rob: Prior to that, you know, you look at all the focus was the greenfield redevelopment.

Haley: Yeah.

Rob: And It was the sprawl, and it wasn't until the early 2000s when our administration started recognizing that we need to start reinvesting back in our urban core or, you know, we're going to have a major issue here.

Haley: So, when you redevelop these brownfield sites, are there issues with gentrification. I'm assuming when you redevelop these sites, it raises the property value of the properties around it, is that correct?

Rob: Correct.

Haley: So does that end up displacing residents of the community or has there been measures to adjusting to that?

Rob: With brownfields redevelopment, It's such a slow process that it does allow the neighborhood to transition with it. I mean, realistically, like I said, I look at most of our cleanup projects in, you know, very seldom we have something that's done in a year. Most of our cleanup projects are long term type sites that have been, you know, Barber-Colman, when we started cleaning that site up in 2001. So ultimately, when it gets redeveloped, you know, obviously, there's going to be a transition period there. But, you know, one of the things that we plan on seeing is you bring back Brownfield, you redevelop brownfields, and you're going to be creating better jobs in that area, you're going to be creating better services in that area, which, you know, with that increase in income, you're going to have people reinvesting in their properties. You know, we really try to push for these owner occupied uses. You know, one of the worst things that's happened to Rockford was the housing crash, you know, 2008, 2009, and what it did is, you look at these neighborhoods, these established legacy neighborhoods of Rockford, and all these homes went into foreclosure. And what happened to 'em? They got sold off or auctioned off to out of town landlords who flipped them into rentals. And, you know, we've seen the studies, we know what rental properties do to these legacy neighborhoods, takes one or two bad apples, and it can really poison the neighborhood.

Haley: So moving forward with these improvements that Rockford has been pushing to implement, where are there areas for improvement?

Rob: I think there's always areas for improvement. I think the biggest thing that we need to keep working towards and it's something that we have been doing, but there needs to be more of, is there needs to be more public private investment into some of these sites. You know, the Embassy Suites is a, was a perfect example of how the public and private side can work together to achieve a common goal. There was some pretty significant incentives that we offered getting that site redeveloped. But, you know, you look at the long term effects that the Embassy Suites is going to have, not only with, you know, it's going to take a property with basically no property tax on it, and it's going to get back on the tax rolls, it's created jobs for that neighborhood, that area, well paying jobs. Brings a sense of pride to that area as well, look what they built down here. You know, it's drawn people to it. So I think the continued push for that private public partnership in some of these sites is what's going to be key.

Haley: And how can Rockford implement more inclusive solutions? Would you say it's pretty much like the same thing, more public and private investment?

Rob: Yup.

Haley: Alrighty, so that being said, is there anything else you would like to tell me about your work in Rockford as it relates to, you know, these environmental solutions in the area?

Rob: One of the one other interesting things that we have going now is, so back in December, we passed a, what we call a Nuisance Solid Waste Ordinance. And what it basically is, is it's our brownfields ordinance, and it gives us the ability now to, you know, for a site like Barber-Colman, or, you know, these old, old industrial sites that these, you know, Fortune 500 companies left 30, 40, 50 years ago, pulled up shop, left town, and left environmental mess. It actually gives us the ability to go back on them now, and either force them to clean up the site or face, you know, compounding fines as we move forward. You know, with Barber-Coleman, we are confident we have a responsible party that probably doesn't even realize that they bought a company that bought a company that bought Barber-Coleman, back in 1987. But from an environmental standpoint, they still have skin in the game in that legacy site, they're still considered responsible party. So trying to pull back those companies that have left town so many years ago is going to be [a challenge], but we've seen it accomplished in other communities, and it's something we're working for doing, and obviously, it'll help offset the amount of investment that we're making to cleaning up these sites.

Haley: I want to ask one more question in regards to what we were talking about earlier with the brownfield redevelopment. So you're saying that that process is pretty slow, and it allows time for the community to adjust, so I was just curious as to how does the community adjust to those changes?

Rob: Most of the money that we use for these assessments and cleanups are, they're grant funded, so a huge portion of those grants is public outreach. Not only in the process of applying for them, you know, we have to have public meetings, we have to, you know, seek out public input, just in the application process, but we also have to continue that after we were awarded these grants. And, I can't even tell you, very frequently— are you a member of the city Rockford government Facebook page, by any chance?

Haley: I'm not really on Facebook in all honesty, but is that a page you would suggest?

Rob: Yeah, so one of the things, you know, I used to do a lot of neighborhood meetings, you know, promote our brownfields projects, let, inform, residents know of cleanups that were going on in their neighborhood, you know, just part of that public outreach. And with COVID, unfortunately, we, you know, a lot of those neighborhood meetings went away, and a few virtual ones here and there. So one of the things we've really switched to in promoting what we're doing on the brownfield side of things is social media, and about every two weeks, we're putting out, you know, a little blast highlighting different

projects that, you know, different activities, you know, even even as something as little as removing an underground storage tank from a blighted property, just to inform residents what we're doing to clean up that area, what we're doing to address issues, you know, whether it be blight, removal, environmental cleanup, whatever, anything we can do that shows that we're reinvesting in to these, you know, former eyesores to turn them into assets, and it's been taken very well, I'm very surprised, so that's what means that we're doing to it. Like I said, as far as the adjustment, though, I think most people just generally accept that that, you know, as they make improvements, you know, not only to the neighborhood but around the neighborhood, these property values are going to go up. And like I said, with brownfields, it's usually a slow process. You know, they have time to adjust to it. But, you know, unfortunately, like it does put some economic strain, maybe on some challenged residences, there are programs out there that can assist with that.

Haley: What programs does the city have to help with that?

Rob: That's a, that's a human services question there.

Haley: Human services? Okay.

Rob: Yeah, I'm not, I know that they've got, whether it be help with like utilities, you know, rental assistance, things like that. There are programs out there that are human services.

Haley: Sounds like Rockford is pretty good at, you know, touching base with their communities and seeing what people actually want and need.

Rob: You know, I definitely try to do as much promotion as we can. We got a website just for our brownfields projects, and what's going on, and I keep that updated and maintained. Try to, try to be creative and do as much as we can.

Haley: Yeah, yeah. That's good, that's good. So well, is there anything else you'd like to touch on, or? I think we covered everything for the most part.

Rob: I think we covered quite a bit. Like I said, I also manage all the City's sanitation contracts, so, you know, we do our best to promote recycling. That's one of the challenges now, is more so education on, educating people what can and can't be recycled, because we've got a huge issue with, it's unfortunate, right now recycling isn't very efficient.

Haley: Yeah.

Rob: By that is, you know, we've got commingled recycling in the City, you got the blue bins, everything goes in there, that gets put in a truck, gets hauled into a material recovery facility in Homewood, Illinois. Anything that is not recyclable, ends up back in a truck and ends up back at our landfill, which right now we're approximating about 30, 35% of everything that goes in is coming back, so you think to the carbon footprint math on that when you're talking to trucking that to and from Homewood. It's just, it's

something that really needs to be cleaned up, so last year, we put a pretty big effort on more so still educating people what can and can't be recycled, and trying to increase those numbers as well.

Haley: What have they been doing to try to increase the education in regards to that?

Rob: Just community outreach, so our social media blasts...

Haley: Okay.

Rob: ...are the big things. We've been working through local organizations like Keep Northern Illinois Beautiful.

Haley: I actually volunteered with them before.

Rob: Did you? Okay. Yep, so we work with them a lot to help promote stuff. You know, we've got a very active solid waste website. Pretty much will tell you anything you want to get rid of in the city of Rockford, that'll tell you how to do it. We keep that updated pretty well, and like I said, a lot of neighborhood meetings are starting to come back in, so we do a lot of promotion with neighborhood meetings, virtual meetings, whatever we could do to kind of, to clean that stream up.

Haley: Do you think your public outreach efforts reach the majority of the community? Or do you think there is ways that that could be improved?

Rob: There's always ways to improve them. You know, right now, I think the biggest challenge is in, like I've been saying, to bring up southwest Rockford again, because, you know, the, recently had a health impact study done to, to go with the brownfields revitalization study(should these be capitalized?). And, you know, that study found that, you know, an upwards of 50% of Southwest Rockford is primarily Spanish speaking. So trying to, you know, like I said, our website is available in multiple languages, the social media posts, obviously, are converted to multiple languages, and that helps a ton. But, you know, sometimes just getting that language barrier, trying to find the best way to promote that, because a lot of the older populations, they don't have social media.

Haley: Yeah.

Rob: So how do you do that? You know, we'll put press releases out. Occasionally we'll do, you know, news interviews, things like that, because with our older populations, we found that, what do they still do? They still watch the news every day.

Haley: Or read the newspaper.

Rob: Or read the newspaper and what's left of it, yeah.

Haley: Yeah. One thing that I've learned through all this is that sustainability is a very multifaceted, complex topic.

Rob: Yup.

Haley: And you have to touch all the bases, you know, even just down to things like that, like, what does the older generation use to get their information, like you have to think of everything.

Rob: And it's all web together too, somehow.

Haley: Yes, exactly. Make sure that everybody gets the benefits, so...

Rob: Yeah.

Haley: That's an important thing, to take care of our neighbors, even if we don't see them all the time.

Rob: Yup.

Haley: Well, that being said, I feel like, you know, we've pretty much touched on everything that I wanted to talk about.

Rob: I think we covered about everything I wanted to hit.

Haley: And Actually, do you know anything in regards to the Keith Creek? That's like a project that I've been interested in. Does that apply to brownfields at all?

Rob: So I've been brought in, I mean there's some property acquisitions that we would like to make, you know, obviously strategic ones to help, you know, expand that bottleneck that's causing the flooding. Don't really don't the status of it right now, but...

Haley: I think R1 Planning kind of took it over.

Rob: They did along with our stormwater team.

Haley: Alrighty, well, I should probably hop off cuz I actually should probably get to work, but thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate your sharing your insight, and participating in my little podcast.

Rob: Anything you guys need from us, just let me know. It's nice to see someone from Rockford out there doing some good. Nice talking with you.

Haley: Yeah, you too. Thank you so much, Robert. And have a wonderful day.

Rob: You too, bye.

Haley: Bye, bye! 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 Robert Wilhelmi and Kyle Saunders for sharing their valuable insight during part two of this discussion. I would also like to thank anyone listening in on this podcast, as I always appreciate your support of *Green Exploration: Rockford*. I would just like to remind you 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 life, 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.