



MINNESOTA
GREENSTEP
PROGRAM

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the benefits of joining the GreenStep program and implementing its best practices?

The answers to this question will be different for different cities, but here are the key points we have heard from GreenStep cities and around which we have designed the program. The GreenStep program:

- **Is a continuous improvement pathway** for cities to "go green," becoming more sustainable and resilient.
- **Will save city staff time** in researching proven, cost-effective actions for cutting energy use, decreasing the city's carbon footprint, and accomplishing other sustainability goals that exceed regulatory requirements. Information on and an Advisor for how to complete 170 actions - in the best practice groups of buildings, land use, transportation, environment, and economic/community development - is continuously updated with Minnesota-specific information.
- **Will save cities** money and deliver a stream of multiple environmental, social and financial benefits; will help cities explore how to spend the same amount of money smarter.
- **Is a home-grown, independent program tailored to Minnesota cities** and provides maximum flexibility and total control and choice in how to implement a proven best practice.
- **Provides over 4,000 reports** on how Minnesota cities are taking action, making it easy to learn from and contact peer cities so as to jump-start

actions in your own city.

- **Opens up special opportunities** for funding and technical assistance, available mostly to GreenStep cities because the GreenStep program focuses on existing GreenStep cities.
- **Positions a city** to more easily apply for competitive grant and assistance programs.
- **Maps out how to follow-through** on the various commitments cities may have made, such as Tree City USA, the U.S. Mayors Climate Protection Agreement (signed by over 40 Minnesota cities), and on the Minnesota Legislature's aggressive Next Generation Energy Act.
- **Provides leadership and action roles for community** members, businesses and institutions so as to stretch limited city funds and strengthen a civic culture of engagement and innovation. We encourage cities to use student interns to help enter best practice action reports on the GreenStep web site, and have an intern manual to make this easier.
- **Continuously prompts** program participants - like an exercise coach would! - to maximize opportunities to accelerate sustainability actions.
- **Provides public recognition** of the good work being done by Minnesota cities.

What recognition is there for a GreenStep City?

- **Annual peer recognition** at the June conference of the League of Minnesota Cities.
- **Annual \$1,000** LMC/GSC Sustainable City Award.
- **Your city's accomplishments will be visible** on the GreenStep web site, the most comprehensive web site in Minnesota devoted to city sustainability.
- **Artwork and recognition materials** (logos, sample press releases, road signs).
- **Five steps of recognition:**

- **Step One:** for cities that have passed a city council resolution to work on implementing best practices of their own choice and at their own pace.
- **Step Two:** for cities that have implemented any 4, 6 or 8 best practices (depending on city Category/city capacity).
- **Step Three:** for cities that have implemented an additional 4, 6 or 8 best practices (depending on city Category) and completed a handful of specific high-impact actions - this can take between one and a few years.
- **Step Four:** for cities that report (by May 1st), for the previous calendar year, between 7 and 10 core city performance metrics and 5, 3, or no (depending on city Category) additional metrics of their choice.
- **Step Five:** for cities that report improvement in a minimum number of metrics.

How does the GreenStep program define sustainability; what's the vision?

Defining the state or condition of sustainability in a city, and the city process of and accomplishments from moving toward greater sustainability - sustainable development - is best done by each city. That said, much has been written about sustainability since the 1980s. For an excellent overview, and a discussion of resilience, see *Sustainable Development and Its Discontents* (Dernbach & Cheever: 2015). GreenStep suggests, as a starting point, that cities consider the MPCA's page "What makes a community sustainable?" and the definition and policy language adopted by the League of Minnesota Cities (click on the latest policy document and find Sustainable Development under Improving Service Delivery).

The GreenStep program, being based in a state environmental agency, focuses on environmental sustainability but clearly weaves in economic and social issues as well. The city performance metrics of Steps 4 and 5 include a few economic

and social sustainability measures but cities are encouraged to develop measures of their own to fully flesh out measurement in these other two core areas of sustainability.

The program vision of Minnesota GreenStep Cities is that environmental sustainability becomes the norm for all Minnesota cities. By norm we mean an accepted standard or way of thinking and doing things that most people agree with. Norms tend to take hold and spread when 15-20% of the 'target population' adopt them. Depending on how you categorize the 125+ GreenStep cities - by geographic region, size cohorts - GreenStep feels we are making a measurable contribution to making sustainability the norm in Minnesota cities.

What if my city or Tribal Nation is collaborating with townships, the county or a school district?

The GreenStep Cities program recognizes best practice actions taken by and catalyzed by city government and occurring within city limits. We also want to capture actions taken by collaborating entities - townships, the county, and a school/school district. If your city is working with one or more of these entities, let us know by listing (when you register on the web site) the county, township(s) by name and/or the school/school district with whom you are working to implement best practices that affect territory within and outside of the city proper.

Several Tribal Nations in Minnesota have joined the GreenStep program under a GreenStep Tribal Nations pilot program and are reporting completion of actions within their boundaries, in which are townships, cities and counties. GreenStep actions are generally not a perfect fit for the tribal context, but we welcome Tribes to interpret the actions liberally and to use the web site to report accomplishments.

What are the city Categories and why have them?

Cities with greater capacity for making civic improvements are able to implement more best practices and more difficult actions, and are thus challenged under the GreenStep program to do so in order to receive the same Step level recognition as lower-capacity cities. City capacity is not tightly tied to city population however: a small city in the Twin Cities metro area for example benefits, by taking no action themselves, from access to existing regional systems such as transit, wastewater, water and storm water that a city with the same population in Greater Minnesota does not. So the GreenStep program has each city complete a simple 10-question spreadsheet to determine their city Category. In general:

- **Category C** cities have no or only a handful of city buildings and staff
- **Category B** cities have city buildings and staff, maintain roads, and have a public works and planning/development department
- **Category A** cities are within a metro area or serve as a regional economic and service center. They are served by regular transit routes and have distinct commercial and industrial areas.

If the spreadsheet classifies your city in a Category that does not seem fair or make sense to you, please contact the GreenStep Cities program coordinator.

May my city claim credit for best practice actions completed years ago?

Yes. Those actions contributed to greater sustainability in your city and the public should know about them. We think most cities will be pretty close to being recognized at Step Two once they log on to the web site and post information about best practices implemented before they joined GreenStep. The only caveat to claiming credit for previous actions taken is that if the action

is an ongoing action - for example, qualify as a Tree City USA, or purchase 15% of city energy requirements from renewable energy sources, or limit barriers to higher density by code - the city must currently be qualifying for, funding, staffing or keeping in force those actions. GreenStep staff at the MPCA do not routinely check/verify that a city action is indeed ongoing. Rather, we expect that over the years each city will periodically update their previously submitted actions. Readers will know this by then seeing a more recent "Date of last report update."

Are there different types and difficulty levels of actions?

Actions are of four types, corresponding to the typical tools a city uses to make civic improvements:

- **Changes in city policy**, ordinances, regulations, incentives
- **Investments** of financial capital or a commitment to funding operating costs
- **Development and staffing** of city assistance programs - financial, informational, educational
- **Collaboration** with and leveraging the resources of others, such as business groups, civic groups, schools and the county

Most best practices have actions of all four types and actions that range from easier to more difficult. All actions have three completion levels: good, better, best. Actions completed at a good level tend to be easier, and actions completed at a best level tend to be more difficult (for example, requiring greater investment, requiring measurement, greater political will). But easy and difficult differ among cities: a best-level completion of an action in one city may be easy and in another city it may be more difficult. Overall, GreenStep provides a wide range of actions that are doable for Category B and C cities.

A handful of actions are ones that schools and businesses in your city could take, with or without city involvement but for which a city can claim credit, as these actions represent greater sustainability within your community and should

be known by the public and others wishing to emulate them.

What do the blue stars mean?

One, two or three blue stars show up in several places on the GreenStep web site. They denote a city's completion of a best practice action at a **"good" (1-star) level, "better" (2-star),** or **"best" (3-star) level.** Cities self-report how they have completed an action, and GreenStep Cities staff mark each action (in consultation with the city) as complete at a 1-, 2- or 3-star level. Guidance for what constitutes completion at different star levels is found on the web site by clicking on the text of a best practice action and viewing the Star-level Examples tab. These Examples provide more detail than is included in the action text, and sometimes clarifies that a city need do only one part of an action to have their work marked as complete at a 1, 2 or 3-star level.

The **Star-level Examples** are rarely absolute criteria for achievement of a star level for a particular action a city has completed. This is because this guidance is continually being refined as cities report more actions, and report actions in more creative/unanticipated ways. Cities are encouraged to attempt to complete an action at a 2- or 3-star level, but completion of all actions at a 1-star level is sufficient for cities that are recognized as Step Two and Step Three cities.

The word **"Pending"** by a city action report means that the GreenStep Cities program staff have not yet read and assigned a completion/star level to the action report. The phrase **"Not rated"** for an action report means either the action report falls short of a 1-star rating, or for a very few actions, the city report is for an action that has changed (but the old city report under the old action remains) and has been replaced with the current action.

Why are a handful of specific best practices and specific actions part of Step Three recognition?

Cities are recognized at Step Two upon implementation of any 4, 6 or 8 (depending on their city Category) best practices. Some cities choose to continue implementing best practices - for example, drilling down and focusing on all the actions that relate specifically to city operations - and remain active at Step Two. To be recognized at Step Three, the GreenStep program thinks several diverse best practices are essential to greater sustainability within city limits, and some/all (depending on city Category) of these core, high-impact best practices must be implemented by cities in order to be recognized as a Step Three GreenStep City. Think of them as college distribution requirements that ensure a student rounds out their education. Implementing these best practices will:

- **Make your buildings more** energy-efficient, healthier, and cheaper to operate
- **Make land use regulations** legally defensible and publicly supported
- **Make moving around** the city possible, pleasant, free and healthful without always using a car
- **Save money** and cut energy use by smarter city purchasing
- **Expand the urban tree canopy**, delivering a stream of multiple financial, environmental and quality of life benefits
- **Exceed storm water requirements** and mitigate cost liabilities at a cheaper long-term cost
- **Provide community members** with engagement options and a scorecard of city performance
- **Increase the city tax base** by strengthening local businesses
- **Make your community more resilient** to a changing climate

Within these high-impact best practices - as is the case for almost all the best practices - cities mostly have a choice as to which specific action or actions to complete in order to claim credit for implementing that best practice. **The**

minimum number of best practices (BPs) and actions cities complete in order to be recognized at Step Three are as follows:

- **Category A cities:** 10 specific BPs; 9 specific actions; 27 actions in total
- **Category B cities:** 7 specific BPs; 7 specific actions; 18 actions in total
- **Category C cities:** 4 specific BPs; 4 specific actions; 9 actions in total

What if my city has done/wants to do an action not on the list?

As cities have reported accomplishments that fit within the 29 best practices but which are not clearly defined in an action, the Star guidance, and sometimes an existing action, has been modified to allow cities to take credit. In a few instances an entirely new action has been created. Feel free to contact the GreenStep coordinator to discuss accomplishments in your city that you think should fit within the existing actions but don't seem to.

Who picked the best practice actions and why?

The GreenStep Cities report to the 2009 Legislature lists the dozens of city representatives and topical experts involved in developing the best practices. This input, in addition to review of over a dozen state-level sustainability challenge programs across the U.S., has resulted in what the GreenStep Cities steering committee thinks are truly best practice actions for cities as they strive to meet their sustainability goals. By best practice action we mean an action that is:

- **doable** for most Minnesota cities
- **a beneficial stretch** for some cities
- **delivers one or more benefits** for which evidence exists

How does participation in the GreenStep Cities program fit in with my city's existing programs and plans?

The GreenStep program is one of several frameworks and checklists that cities can use to focus on completing specific actions. We anticipate that cities have and will develop specific internal plans and programs that facilitate completion of GreenStep actions. And we know that cities will join other programs, such as Tree City U.S.A., participation in which a city can count as a GreenStep action. Uniquely, the GreenStep web site is an easy way for a city to publicly post, on one State-maintained web site, an ongoing catalogue of actions taken to build a more environmentally sustainable city.

What if my city's participation in GreenStep pauses for a time?

A GreenStep city has passed a city council resolution to work on implementing best practices of their own choice and at their own pace. It might take a city striving toward Step Three recognition between one and a few years. GreenStep staff try to be in touch with every city every year, and recognize there may be a one or two-year period when a city does not enter any new actions on the GreenStep web site.

If after three years from the time a city joins the program the city has not entered any action data, or if the city has gone three years without entering a new action or editing an existing action, "Inactive" may replace the city's current Step. GreenStep staff will discuss this with the city and see if they can help the

city return to an active status by posting a new or edited action. Should a GreenStep city pass a resolution to quit the GreenStep program, all city information would be removed from the web site.

Will the best practice actions and program requirements change over time?

Yes, but we have made only small changes over time, mostly in the Star-level Examples of what constitutes completion of an action at a good (1-star), better (2-star) and best (3-star) level. And we continually work to make each action clear enough so that cities easily know to claim one accomplishment under just one best practice action. Based on an annual cycle of feedback from cities, best practice advisors and topical experts and based on changes in technology, financing, regulations, state-wide assistance, and other factors, we think ongoing small changes will be needed to keep the suite of actions and the program requirements current, relevant to cities, and challenging yet doable.

Can I be certified as a green city, as opposed to being recognized as one?

Yes: the LEED for Cities & Communities program uses the LEED rating system structure and may be most appropriate for the largest Minnesota cities that want to invest money measuring and rigorously certifying their sustainability achievements. It was developed through a partnership between ICLEI USA, the U.S. Green Building Council, and the Center for American Progress.

Who started GreenStep Cities?

During fall of 2007, Minnesota's Clean Energy Resource Teams (CERTs) held regional listening sessions around the state to discuss community-based energy opportunities and the state's Next Generation Energy Act of 2007. The idea was raised to create a sustainable cities program, free to cities, that would challenge, assist and recognize cities that were "green stars."

In 2008, Governor Tim Pawlenty signed legislation authorizing research into the creation what is today the GreenStep program. In 2009, the State Legislature analyzed the proposal for the GreenStep program and there was bi-partisan agreement that the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency would, working with the League of Minnesota Cities and other partner organizations, take the lead in creating the program for the benefit of Minnesota cities and for energy, greenhouse gas and cost reductions. The legislation and the program report are posted on the GreenStep Cities About page.

Representatives from dozens of cities, non-profit organizations, businesses and state government agencies provided the outline for what has been developed as the Minnesota GreenStep Cities program, which officially began in June 2010.

Why Cities?

The actions necessary to improve individuals' quality of life and promote environmental stewardship are based at the local level. Cities have the ability and flexibility, through their elected officials, to take swift action that includes public participation. The GreenStep Cities program assists in supporting these actions through technical assistance and peer-to-peer sharing. Because this is a voluntary action program, GreenStep Cities leaves the control at the city-level.

More questions?

Don't hesitate to contact the GreenStep coordinator through the Contact menu item on the GreenStep web page at <https://greenstep.pca.state.mn.us>