

SustainLane's 2006 US City Sustainability Ranking

SustainLane's 2006 U.S. City Rankings of the nation's 50 largest cities are the nation's most complete report card on urban sustainability. The rankings explain how people's quality of life and city economic and management preparedness are likely to fare in the face of an uncertain future. These indicators gauge, for instance, which cities' public transit, renewable energy, local food, and development approaches are more likely to either limit or intensify the negative economic and environmental impacts of fossil fuel dependence.

Since the first SustainLane US City Rankings came out in Spring 2005, world events have made "sustainability" an even more vital concept. Hurricane Katrina has shown how vulnerable city dwellers can be, and also how our nation's economy and way of life is dependent on often-unpredictable natural and market forces. After Katrina and Rita hit in late summer 2005 destroying New Orleans and Gulf oil processing facilities, gas prices shot up. Prices subsided only to move up again in 2006 to record levels because of global political events combined with steadily growing demand for oil in Asia.

Neither world politics nor global oil supplies are expected to be stable until the end of the decade or beyond. And the carbon emission-created global warming of the Atlantic's water temperatures is influencing more stronger-than-average hurricane seasons. So the term "sustainability," officially defined as meeting the needs of the present generation so it doesn't compromise the quality of life for future generations, has taken on new urgency.

Quality of Life and Clean Technologies

Besides city energy crisis preparedness and natural disaster risk, SustainLane's rankings cover quality-of-life indicators such as local food availability, tap water quality, air quality, walkability, park space and roadway congestion.

Providing an atmosphere for healthy living is only part of the picture. To illustrate the path cities need to take to maintain regional economic competitiveness, SustainLane's city rankings track the growth of complementary clean technologies providing jobs and tax base expansion. Exciting developments in renewable energy, advanced transportation, alternative fuels and green building technologies are emerging in and around U.S. cities because of city policies and practices, combined with venture capital investment and consumer demand.

Why Rank or Focus on Cities?

The prosperity of cities and metro areas is critical because for the first time in history they represent the majority of the world's population. Unlike nations or even states, cities are sited in specific climates with distinct economic qualities and geographic features. Wind turbines, tidal energy and locally produced biofuels capitalize on geographic differences. Local food system development and green building approaches also are the result of regional geographies and climates--food systems and architecture can be further enriched by local cultural and historic preferences and knowledge.

The local nature of every city's economy is reinforced by a tax bases, school districts, elections, sporting teams, events, seasons and even the weather. Residents often identify first and foremost with their cities. And proximity to other residents and offices of local government means that many citizens are more directly engaged with their city than their state or nation.

In many cities, you can meet your city's mayor, or at least your elected city officials, without much difficulty or travel. This means that cities get feedback in near real time: when a subway line

suddenly needs serious repair or when a water main breaks, city management usually finds out the same day. Said Mayor Greg Nickels of Seattle, which was ranked #3 in SustainLane's city rankings, "I've worked in local government my entire adult life. Because it's a place where you can make a difference: you can roll up your sleeves every day and at the end of the day see the difference you've made."

Because of all the local cultural, economic and political influences, cities are the ideal geo-political medium for sustainability-related improvements, pilot projects and awareness campaigns.

What Makes a City #1?

The SustainLane US City Rankings focus on the many ways in which city policies and practices differ from one another and how that affects the people living in those places. This year's #1 most sustainable city, Portland, captured the top spot with an all-around good to great performance in most every category we analyzed. Ranked below average only in affordability and natural disaster risk, Portland excels in clean technology and green building development, overall quality of life, and in sustainability planning and management.

How did Portland get the top spot? People in the city identify with having a high quality of life more than in most cities. They work hard at being involved in city policy, boards, projects and practices that impact sustainability.

Said Portland's Mayor Tom Potter, "We're definitely proud to be recognized by SustainLane for all the ways Portland's citizens and businesses are working together to create a more sustainable community. In Portland the local governments are leaders for sustainability but it's really the grassroots actions from the neighborhoods and the businesses that make this a special place. The City is buying renewable power and conserving energy, and so are tens of thousands of residents. The City has a green building policy, but it's the builders and developers and buyers who actually change the market. It's the people who shop at the farmers markets, the growers who manage their farms sustainably, the folks who choose to bike or take the bus to work, and all those day-to-day decisions that are making a huge difference."

Now Portland is using its sustainability ethos to attract businesses, residents, tourists and conventions. It's city slogan, "It's Not Easy Being Green," reflects a marketing savvy that gives the city national currency as one of the capitals of a powerful emerging domestic economy.

Other cities are involved in leading the way as well: Chicago in renewable energy and urban greening; Boston, Minneapolis and Oakland in local food development; Denver in citywide transit oriented development; and Atlanta in green building.

Next Step: Best Practices

We welcome your input on these issues and thank all the people who provided great ideas over the past two years that helped improve the SustainLane US City Rankings. Each of the 50 cities analyzed in this ranking has a dedicated page with a summary of its progress in sustainability programs and practices.

If you are a city, county or state official, please register and submit a best practice in sustainability or environmental management to our best practices knowledge base. If you are a citizen, please contact your local government officials to let them know about SustainLane Government's free best practice knowledge base.

That way the innovations your city is implementing so it can become more sustainable in terms of its environment, its economy, its people and their future can be utilized by local government across the nation.