

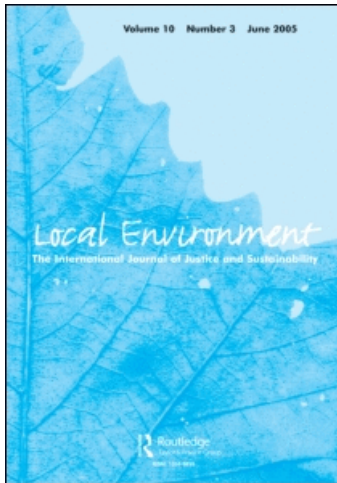
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Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 917273070]

Publisher Routledge

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Local Environment

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713394137>

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Online publication date: 13 April 2010

To cite this Article Portney, Kent E. and Cuttler, Zachary (2010) 'The local nonprofit sector and the pursuit of sustainability in American cities: a preliminary exploration', *Local Environment*, 15: 4, 323 – 339

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/13549831003677704

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13549831003677704>

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The local nonprofit sector and the pursuit of sustainability in American cities: a preliminary exploration

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This paper reports on the results of a study of the relationship between the nonprofit sector and the pursuit of sustainability in 13 moderate sized US cities with populations between 400,000 and 600,000. Dividing the cities into two groups – those that have been more serious and less serious about adopting and implementing sustainability policies, analysis of a survey of local public officials examines differences in the nonprofit landscape. Analysis shows that the cities that are more serious about sustainability have local public officials who interact more with nonprofit organisations, and are more likely to report the presence of at least one nonprofit group that supports city sustainability policies. Additionally, these reported groups are more likely to be “local”, or homegrown, and to be explicitly dedicated to the environment or sustainability. While far from definitive, the results provide evidence that the nonprofit sector is different in cities with sustainability policies, and suggest that the role of these nonprofit groups in the governance decisions of city leaders warrants more in-depth study.

Keywords: sustainable cities; urban sustainability; nonprofit organisation; nonprofit sector; sustainability policies

Nongovernmental organisations and nonprofit organisations have been extraordinarily important in the pursuit of sustainability around the world. In terms of the pursuit of local sustainability, many national and international organisations have been instrumental in serving as the catalyst and co-ordinator of efforts to promote sustainability and environmental protection. By now, the operation in the USA of large environmental groups generally (Berry 1999, Shaiko 1999) is well documented, and the role of the ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability (formerly known as the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives), through its Climate Change Programme, and its Local Agenda 21 and Local Action 21 programs, is clear. Moreover, in the USA, the National Conference of Mayors, a nonprofit organisation consisting of city and town mayors, has taken up the charge of climate protection with its Climate Change Agreement, now signed by over a 1000 mayors. And both the Sierra Club’s Cool Cities initiative and the Audubon Society’s Sustainable Communities Program have made efforts to engage US cities in promoting aspects of sustainability.

What is less well documented and understood is the role of the myriad local nonprofit organisations and local chapters of statewide or national nonprofit organisations, in

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promoting sustainability in specific cities and towns. A brief look at some specific cities that seem to excel in the pursuit of sustainability, such as Seattle and Portland, suggests that various kinds of nonprofit organisations are of paramount importance. Case studies have documented the importance of nonprofit and grassroots groups in specific cities (Logan 1995, AtKisson 1996, Bullard and Johnson 1997, Bullard *et al.* 2000, Agyeman 2005, Vallianatos *et al.* 2005). Correlational studies seem to suggest that the presence of supportive nonprofit groups is associated with the city adoption of sustainability, climate protection, and smart growth policies. Yet beyond these case and correlational studies, there is surprisingly little empirical evidence to facilitate any sort of broader understanding of whether, how, and in what ways local nonprofit organisations may in fact make a difference in the pursuit of sustainable cities. Many have examined and even touted the importance of public participatory processes in devising sustainability programs, yet few explicitly discuss the organisational or group foundations of such participation (Agyeman and Evans 1995, Potapchuck 1996, Selman and Parker 1997, Costanza *et al.* 2000, Baber and Bartlett 2005, Cuthill 2002, Portney 2005).

This paper presents an exploration into the roles played by local nonprofits. It is preliminary in the sense that the information on which it is based is derived from a pilot study of only 13 mid-sized US cities. In these 13 cities, this pilot study does not seek to build a complete picture of the local nonprofit world, a formidable challenge in any one of these cities. It does examine whether there are some basic patterns with respect to the kinds of nonprofits that seem to operate in cities that are apparently more serious in their pursuit of sustainability, and to search for differences in these patterns compared to cities that are far less serious. It does this with the goal of formulating some hypotheses and expectations that can be examined in the future with a more robust array of cities and data.

Before beginning an investigation into the selected US cities, two issues need to be addressed. First, a brief discussion of what the local pursuit of sustainability seems to mean in the USA will demonstrate which cities actually seem to be working towards becoming more sustainable and what they are actually doing to accomplish this. This information will be used to lay the framework for understanding the 13 specific cities that are the subject of this investigation. Second, a brief overview of the landscape of nonprofit organisations in the USA will serve as the foundation for understanding local nonprofits and their role in sustainability. Although we tend to use the term “nonprofit” as though it refers to one specific kind of organisation, in fact this is a misnomer. Nonprofit organisations, especially local nonprofit organisations, come in lots of different sizes and shapes. They exist for many different purposes, get their financing from many different sources, and serve many different constituencies. So a brief review of some aspects of this landscape is in order.

The local pursuit of sustainability in the USA

Although US cities would probably not be considered among the world leaders in the pursuit of local sustainability, by now there are at least 45 major cities that have adopted some form of sustainability policies. These policies consist of a general articulation of sustainability as a policy goal, and the creation of specific programmes to support the pursuit of that goal. The 45 cities that have sustainability programmes vary considerably in terms of how aggressive they are – how many different programmes they have adopted and how robust those programmes are – but they all share recognition that the pursuit of sustainability is a worthwhile goal.

What kinds of specific programmes have these cities actually adopted in their pursuit of sustainability? There are at least 37 different local programmes conceptually falling into

seven broad categories. The broad categories represent an arbitrary way of grouping these policies and programmes, and certainly other groups are possible. It is not possible here to adequately explain them all, but by way of overview, the categories and the specific programs include the following:

- “Smart growth” programmes include eco-industrial park development, targeted or cluster green economic development, eco-village (urban infill housing and housing densification) projects or programs, and brownfield redevelopment projects.
- Land-use planning and zoning policies and programmes include the use of zoning to delineate environmentally sensitive growth areas, comprehensive land-use planning that incorporates environmental protection, urban agriculture or sustainable food systems, and, especially in cities that do not have zoning authority, the use of tax incentives for environmentally friendly development.
- Transportation planning and policies, including mass transit, limits on downtown parking spaces, high-occupancy vehicle lanes on city streets, alternatively fuelled city vehicle (“green fleet”) programmes, and bicycle ridership programmes.
- Pollution prevention and reduction, including solid and hazardous waste recycling, air emissions reduction programmes (VOC reduction, carbon reduction, or climate action programmes), recycled product purchasing by city government, hazardous waste site remediation, asbestos abatement, lead paint abatement, and pesticide reduction programmes.
- Energy and resource conservation, including green building programs, renewable energy use by city government, residential energy conservation programmes (independent of green building), alternative energy (biofuels, windpower, solar, hydroelectric) offered to consumers, and water conservation efforts.
- Sustainable (livability) indicators projects that have been actively utilised in the last 5 years, including a progress report being issued within the last 5 years, and a clear action plan.
- Administrative, organisational, and managerial co-ordination of the environmental protection function. This grouping includes whether there is a single government agency or office responsible for implementing sustainability programmes, whether sustainability is an explicit part of a citywide comprehensive plan, whether there is involvement of a city/county/metropolitan council, whether there is involvement of the mayor or chief executive officer, whether there is involvement of the business community, and whether the general public is involved (through public hearings, visioning process, or neighbourhood associations).

In addition to adopting and implementing these specific policies and programmes, many cities have made a broad commitment, as a matter of public policy, to try to become more sustainable. This commitment usually takes the form of a resolution by city council, an executive order or proclamation by the mayor or chief executive, or statements in comprehensive policy or planning documents, such as Comprehensive Plan (Saha and Paterson 2008). Table 1 provides a list of the cities included in this study that have official sustainability policies as found in mayors’ executive orders, resolutions of city council, or comprehensive policy or planning documents.

Case studies of the role of specific nonprofits in actually making cities more sustainable are not presented here. Instead, the focus is on what cities are doing in their public policies and programmes to try to become more sustainable, and whether there seems to be an overall pattern where cities that have made some commitment to trying to become more

Table 1. Sustainability programs in eight US cities.

City	Name of sustainability initiative
Atlanta, GA	Sustainability initiative; Greener Atlanta initiative
Boston, MA	Sustainable Boston initiative
Denver, CO	Greenprint Denver
Kansas City, MO	FOCUS Kansas City plan
Milwaukee, WI	Campaign for sustainable Milwaukee
Sacramento, CA	The sustainability agenda; Sacramento 2030 general plan
Seattle, WA	<i>Toward a sustainable Seattle</i> comprehensive plan
Washington, DC	Sustainable solutions; Green DC

sustainable have different nonprofit sector characteristics than cities that have made no such commitment. Thus, as discussed in more detail below, distinguishing between cities where sustainability is truly on the local public agenda and cities where there is little evidence that sustainability is a high priority forms the basis of comparison. Of course, not all cities where sustainability is a high priority can be said to be sustainable in terms of outcomes, such as water or air quality, quality of life, or any other objective measure. Suffice it to say that cities where sustainability is a high priority seem to want to try to become more sustainable regardless of their baseline starting point.

The landscape of local nonprofit organisations in the USA

The term “nonprofit organisation” is applied fairly broadly in common parlance, yet it has a specific legal meaning in the USA. Formally, a nonprofit organisation is a group that has been granted nonprofit status as a 501(c) organisation under the US Internal Revenue Code. It is a status that allows the organisation to operate without the burden of federal, state, or local taxation. Depending on the exact type of organisation and Internal Revenue Code classification, the group may well be constrained in the kinds of political activities it can engage in. Most “public charities” are incorporated as 501(c)3 organisations, and it is only these types of organisations that can offer their prospective donors the opportunity for tax-exempt contributions. In exchange for being able to receive tax-exempt contributions, the nonprofit organisation is prohibited from engaging in the political process. This includes an outright prohibition from engaging in the electoral process, and has been interpreted to include limits on what political scientists refer to as “lobbying”, or contacting public officials for the purpose of policy advocacy. Even so, the line between lobbying and contacting for reasons other than advocacy (such as providing information or consulting over programme development or implementation, e.g.) is so blurred that nonprofit organisations can usually engage in lobbying if they want to (Berry and Arons 2003, pp. 24–31). Although there is a clear legal definition of what constitutes a nonprofit organisation, there are many organisations that operate as nonprofits even though they may not have achieved that legal status. In point of fact, in causal observation, most of the groups that appear to be nonprofits may or may not have true nonprofit status. This paper looks at nonprofits, but there is no assurance that the identified organisations actually are legal nonprofits. In short, as will be discussed later, we queried dozens of officials about which nonprofit organisations they had contact with, which advocated sustainability, and which opposed sustainability. If a survey respondent mentioned the name of an organisation as a nonprofit, we accept that group as a nonprofit. No effort was made to ascertain whether it is, in fact, a legal nonprofit.

Allowing for the definition of a nonprofit in legal terms does not do much to ensure that nonprofits have anything else in common. There are many dozens of different kinds of nonprofits – different because of their missions and goals, their strategies, their sources of revenue, and for many other reasons. Space does not permit a full elaboration of the different kinds of nonprofits that might operate at the local level. As discussed later, this paper makes an attempt to distinguish nonprofits based on several criteria. First, is the organisation a purely local group, or is it a state or national group? Second, does it, in some fashion, present people in a well-defined small geographic area (such as a neighbourhood association) or people with an idea or policy position (such as Smoke Free Denver)? And third, is it a group whose mission is decidedly related to the environment or sustainability, or is the mission more broadly defined?

The local politics of sustainability

This investigation into the role of local nonprofit organisations may be as much about the local political landscape as it is about the organisations themselves. In at least one sense, it is about whether and in what ways nonprofits operate to help influence local policymaking. In the parlance of political science, it is about whether and in what ways such organisations become part of the urban governance regime (Stone 1993, Gibbs and Jonas 2000, Feiock and Andrew 2006). Are nonprofits an integral part of the urban governing coalition, or are they largely outside of this coalition? Are local nonprofits, particularly those that specifically support sustainability, able to get their issues on the local public agenda? Do cities that have more robust nonprofit sectors demonstrate a greater likelihood of being willing to pursue sustainability as a matter of public policy? If a city does not possess a robust nonprofit sector, or even a single nonprofit organisation advocating sustainability, does the pursuit of sustainability seem to face an uphill battle? These are the kinds of questions that animate this analysis.

Many arguments have been put forth to support the idea that widespread participation of the residents of communities represents important, even essential, elements to the successful pursuit of sustainability (Costanza *et al.* 2000, Weber 2003, Baber and Bartlett 2005, Koontz 2006). Yet, there is much less discussion with the ways that mediating organisations, especially those organisations that might be said to produce “bridging social capital” between residents and their local government leaders, and those that aggregate and articulate the collective voices of many residents who share an interest in sustainability, can and do operate in the broader context of the local political process. A number of correlational studies strongly suggest that the presence of nonprofit groups, including environmental groups, is a significant factor in influencing local policy choices in support of sustainability. Lubell *et al.* (2006, p. 303), for example, found that local “interest group indicators” were positively correlated with their “environmental sustainability policy index”. O’Connell (2009) found that among 202 US cities, over half reported having supportive “environmental groups” and nearly that many reported supportive “smart growth groups” (p. 285). Additionally, those cities with more supportive groups were significantly more likely to have adopted some form of smart growth policies (p. 288). Brody *et al.* (2008, p. 36) and Zahran *et al.* (2008, p. 556) found that counties with larger numbers of nonprofit organisations were more likely to participate in the ICLEI Cities for Climate Protection programme. These correlational studies have not described the linkages between such nonprofit organisations and local policymaking. What are the mechanisms that translate the presence of nonprofits into sustainability policies? This itself is a formidable challenge that this paper seeks to begin addressing.

The cities (and data) in this study

The data on which this analysis is based come from a 2006 pilot survey of local officials in 14 moderate-sized US cities with populations from approximately 400,000 to 600,000 residents as measured by the 2000 decennial census. Due to time and resource constraints, this pilot study was capped at these 14 cities, although there are only five US cities not included in this pilot study that fall into this population range.¹ In other words, these cities represent over 82% of the entire universe of US cities in this population range. Although previous research has shown little correlation between the size of cities and their propensity to try to become more sustainable, a practical limit of 14 cities suggested the wisdom of holding population size relatively constant. Washington, DC was included in the original sample of 14 cities, but as a result of a low number of questionnaire responses (no city councillors and only one administrator responded) it was omitted from the analysis here, leaving a total of 13 cities.

For the purposes of this analysis, 7 of the 13 cities are classified as “sustainable cities”, cities that have explicitly articulated policies aimed at trying to become more sustainable, as designated in Table 1. This does not mean that these seven cities are actually sustainable in some objective sense, but rather that they have an official sustainability policy, and have adopted and implemented specific policies and programmes to establish the pursuit of sustainability as a policy goal. These seven cities vary with respect to the degree to which they actually seem to take sustainability seriously in terms of how aggressively they actually pursue their sustainability goals. Evidence suggests that these cities do demonstrate considerable variation in commitment to sustainability, ranging from the exemplary cases of Seattle and Denver, to Milwaukee and Atlanta with the least commitment. Simply identifying and counting the number of the 37 programmes and policies each city has adopted and implemented, an approach used elsewhere to help distinguish cities’ levels of commitment to sustainability (Jepson 2004, Portney 2003, 2005, Lubell *et al.* 2006), reveals that Seattle has committed to 34, Denver 32, Kansas City 23, Sacramento 22, Boston 19, Atlanta 14, and Milwaukee 9, for an overall average of almost 22 programmes. Of course, using programme counts is a crude measure of how seriously these cities take the pursuit of sustainability. There is no guarantee that a city that has a small number of policies is not actually doing more within those policies than a city that has adopted and implemented a larger number of policies. And counting assumes that each of the programmes is of equal importance in achieving actual sustainability when, of course, intuitively this may not seem like reasonable assumption at all (Budd *et al.* 2008). However, because research on the relationship between local public policies and achievement of actual sustainability goals is relatively undeveloped, it is not possible to, in any sense, weight each program in terms of its importance to sustainability.

The other six cities serve as controls or comparison cities. None of these six cities had an official sustainability policy at the time of the survey, and counting the number of specific sustainability-related policies and programmes reveals that Las Vegas has committed to 6, Oklahoma City and Memphis 5 each, and Fort Worth, El Paso, and Charlotte 4 each, for an overall average of 4.6 programs. Clearly, the cities examined here that have official sustainability policies are doing more in their numbers of policies and programmes than the comparison cities.²

Both the groups of seven sustainable cities and the six comparison cities are varied with respect to geographical and regional backgrounds. Including only those cities with similar populations and a wide range of geography should avoid any regional and population selection biases. There are unavoidable regional differences. The comparison group cities are

more likely to be in the South and less likely to be in the Midwest; the comparison group contains no cities from the Northeast or West coast.

Table 2 provides a comparison of demographics of the two groups of cities. The two groups of cities are very similar with respect to population size, the percentages of families below the official poverty line, and reliance on manufacturing industries as a source of employment. Clearly, the sustainable cities group, on average, has higher median family income (owing largely to Seattle), and also larger African American populations and percentages of the population living in poverty. It also has much greater population density. Even so, there is significant variation even within the groups, with Kansas City having very low population density and Las Vegas having a relatively high density. Milwaukee, a city with a sustainability policy, has the highest reliance on manufacturing among all the cities, and Las Vegas, a city with no sustainability policy, has the lowest. The point of these comparisons is to establish that whether these cities are in the sustainable category or not does not seem to be clearly determined by any of the demographics. With the possible exception of income and population density, these two groups of cities appear very similar.³

In order to investigate the local political and civic landscape that seems most conducive to the pursuit of sustainability, this study surveyed local officials and leaders who would be in the position to report on that landscape. So in each city, a list of local officials was compiled, consisting of all of the local elected city councillors; the heads of the city planning, economic development, public works, health, and environment departments; the director of sustainability (if there was one); and local business leaders, especially the executive director and public affairs director of the local Chamber of Commerce. Once the list of the names and addresses of these officials was compiled, a questionnaire was sent to each person. The primary purpose of the survey was to ask questions whose responses would help build a picture of some specific aspects of the political landscape.

Table 2. Basic demographics of the cities

	Population size	Median family income	Per cent African American	Per cent families below poverty	Population density (per square mile)	Per cent employed in manufacturing
Sustainable cities						
Boston	520,702	49,320	24.6	17.8	5557.9	6.1
Denver	545,198	52,139	10.0	12	3625	6.5
Seattle	536,946	69,795	8.2	6.6	6706.8	8.3
Kansas City	440,885	50,540	30.0	12.9	1420	10.1
Milwaukee	556,948	35,675	40.2	21.3	6212	18.5
Atlanta	416,474	42,010	58.6	25.5	3155	7.7
Sacramento	445,287	50,653	16.3	14.7	4240	6.6
Averages	577,073	58,355	31.3	18.5	5152.8	10.4
Comparison cities						
Memphis	642,251	40,111	63.1	21.1	2327.4	10.2
Las Vegas	538,653	57,471	11.3	9.7	4222.5	3.3
El Paso	583,653	35,562	2.8	23.8	2263	13.3
Oklahoma City	515,751	49,769	14.7	14.9	833.8	10.3
Fort Worth	604,538	47,064	18.4	15.7	1827.8	14.6
Charlotte	601,598	56,960	34.3	10.2	2232.4	10.7
Averages	581,074	47,823	24.1	15.9	2284.5	10.4

Source: US Bureau of the Census, *American Factfinder*, 1 August 2007.

The questionnaire was sent to a total of 222 potential respondents in the 13 cities, and yielded 64 completed surveys, for an average of a little over 17 questionnaires sent and nearly 5 completed per city.⁴ Calculating the response rate as the ratio of the number of completed questionnaires (64) to the total number of targeted respondents (222) yields an overall response rate of 28.9%.⁵ This is a response rate that is generally consistent with those reported for mail surveys of public officials in the survey research literature (Dillman 2009).

Key questions and issues

This paper focuses on three key questions or issues related to the role of local nonprofit organisations and the pursuit of sustainability. Ultimately, these key questions are really about the relative importance of nonprofits and whether local nonprofits represent an effective voice for sustainability in local governance. The key questions here are meant to open a window into the investigation of this broader issue even if they cannot provide definitive answers. The approach taken here is to define a number of different variables that characterise the nonprofit community in each city, and to see how closely related these variables are to the pursuit of sustainability. In short, do the “sustainable cities” – Seattle, Denver, Milwaukee, Kansas City, Boston, Atlanta, and Sacramento – look different with respect to these nonprofit characteristics than the comparison cities – Memphis, Las Vegas, El Paso, Oklahoma City, Fort Worth, and Charlotte?

Nonprofit interactions with city leaders

If local nonprofits serve as effective voices in support of the pursuit of sustainability, then one way this voice can be heard is through advocacy – contacting local officials for the purpose of expressing their views. Extensive urban politics literature certainly makes clear that the private sectors – leaders of local business and industry as well as representative groups – are not shy about making their views known to local officials. What is not clear is whether local nonprofits can be equally vocal, and whether when they are vocal, they can have some influence affecting the kinds of sustainability policies and programmes adopted by their cities. In order to investigate this, the questionnaire asked each surveyed official to report on their contacts with nonprofit and related kinds of groups. Specifically, Question 17 asked:

17. Considering all the various kinds of citizen, neighborhood, and nonprofit groups that exist in the City, about how many times **over the last year** have you met with a representative from any of these groups?

Rather than relying on the answers to this question alone, the survey also asked respondents how often they are contacted by business leaders. Specifically, question 11 asked:

11. About how many times **over the last year** have you met with the City’s business leaders?

Answers to these two questions were used to compute a ratio of contacts with nonprofit leaders to contacts with business leaders. In this way, officials who happen to have more total contacts generally would not skew the results. The expectation is that leaders in the sustainable cities will have much more contact with nonprofits relative to businesses than leaders in the comparison cities. Indeed, if contacting represents an important

mechanism for nonprofits to be heard, one would expect it to be reflected in this ratio. This approach neither guarantees that the nonprofit groups engaged in contacting local officials advocate for sustainability, nor that the business groups oppose sustainability. This issue, however, is examined later.

Table 3 shows the ratios for all 13 cities, and provides group averages. The first column reports information for all surveyed officials; the second column reports information just for the responding city councillors. Officials in the “sustainable cities” have, on average, six times more contact with nonprofit and community organisations than businesses, and leaders in the comparison cities have only two and a half times more contact. This result is heavily skewed by 2 outlier cities in the sustainability group – Boston and Denver – where officials report being contacted more than 10 times as often by nonprofits as by businesses. Even so, nonprofit contacting in three other cities in the sustainability group – Seattle, Sacramento, and Milwaukee – is higher than in any of the comparison cities. This difference is statistically significant, strongly suggesting that indeed, nonprofit organisations are more active and aggressive in their contacting behaviour in the sustainable cities than in the other cities. The results for city councillors show the same patterns, albeit with a smaller number of respondents.

Nonprofits and support for sustainability

While the contacting information applies broadly to the nonprofit and related sector, it does not show what kinds of nonprofits are doing the contacting or what the purpose of the contacting is. Certainly, most local nonprofit organisations would not be expected to advocate for, or even necessarily be supportive of local sustainability efforts. Especially given the

Table 3. City officials' contacts and local nonprofits.

	All officials: average ratio of nonprofit to business contacts	City councillors: ratio of nonprofit to business contacts	Percentage of all officials reporting at least one sustainability nonprofit contact	Percentage of nonprofit groups mentioned that are “local”	Percentage of nonprofit groups mentioned that are environmental
Sustainable cities					
Boston	10.5	30.0	0.0	33.3	33.3
Denver	10.6	12.2	28.6	57.1	28.6
Seattle	5.0	3.3	100.0	80.0	100.0
Kansas City	1.6	1.7	60.0	80.0	60.0
Milwaukee	4.0	6.0	40.0	40.0	20.0
Atlanta	4.9	5.4	75.0	75.0	50.0
Sacramento	5.2	6.2	25.0	75.0	50.0
Average/Total	6.1	7.6	47.1	64.7	50.0
Comparison cities					
Memphis	3.6	1.3	66.7	66.7	0.0
Las Vegas	1.1	1.0	33.3	0.0	33.3
El Paso	0.6	1.0	14.3	0.0	14.3
Oklahoma City	4.1	3.9	0.0	33.3	0.0
Fort Worth	2.2	2.7	25.0	50.0	25.0
Charlotte	3.4	6.8	14.3	57.1	42.9
Average/Total	2.5	2.8	20.0	33.3	20.0
F/significance	4.1/0.046	2.6/0.114	5.4/0.023	6.7/0.012	6.7/0.012

fact that most institutions of higher education and health providers, including hospitals and health maintenance organisations, are legally defined as nonprofit organisations, there could be a wide array of reasons why nonprofits contact local officials. Among the many ways that the questionnaire sought to get detailed information about the contacts, a series of questions asked respondents specifically to name the groups with which they had contact that promoted sustainability. An open-ended question asked:

20. Are there any specific citizen, neighborhood, business, or nonprofit groups that have met with you over the last year that have sought to **promote** specific programs or policies consistent with livability, sustainability or sustainable economic development? If so, what were the names of the groups?

Answers to this question provide at least a modicum of insight into the character of the local nonprofit sector as it related to sustainability. One city councillor in Milwaukee, a lower-ranked sustainable city, commented that “. . . regular residents and local community organisations are continuously coming forth with ideas and a willingness to work for sustainability, but the leadership from the city government just isn’t there”. Of course, this begs the question why are city leaders not listening. Across all cities, the verbatim responses to this question were recorded, and the analysis here uses these responses to examine the contents of the answer. A list of all the mentioned organisations is found in Table A1. Perhaps the most telling piece of information is that a substantial number of respondents did not name any nonprofit that actively promoted sustainability. The absence of any such organisation – or at least the lack of respondents’ awareness of any organised interest advocating for the pursuit of sustainability – would certainly seem to make supportive policy makers less apt to take actions. Column 3 of Table 3 examines whether respondents in the sustainable cities were more likely to report at least one supportive group than respondents in the comparison cities. Obviously, the fact that respondents did not mention a group does not mean that such a group does not exist. Indeed, in Boston, where none of the respondents report being aware of a group supportive of sustainability, the single largest city-based philanthropic organisation, the Boston Foundation, has been advocating for sustainability for at least the last 5 years (Boston Foundation 2000). What is important here is that, among the respondents, there is a substantial lack of awareness of this group’s efforts on sustainability.

Here it is clear that respondents in the sustainable cities were much more likely to report knowing of at least one supportive group. In the sustainable cities, nearly half of the respondents reported knowing of such a group. Yet in the comparison group, only 20% said they knew of such a group. Clearly, the nonprofit landscape in the sustainable cities seems to look different from that found in the comparison cities, where sustainability is not a high priority. Only Boston in the sustainability group, with no respondents identifying a supportive group, and Memphis in the comparison group, with two-thirds of the respondents identifying a supportive group, are exceptions to the general pattern. This suggests that, while it may be possible to take sustainability at least somewhat seriously without broad awareness of supportive nonprofit groups (as in Boston), high profile nonprofits in support of sustainability seem more the rule in cities that are more serious about sustainability. And while it may be possible for officials of a city to be aware of supportive groups without the city pursuing sustainability, the rule seems to be that the failure to pursue sustainability is associated with the lack of officials’ awareness of any such groups.

Although it was not possible to delve very deeply into what each of the mentioned organisations actually does and how it does it, the analysis here focuses on two specific characteristics of the named organisations. First, is the contacting organisation a purely

local group, or is it a state or national group? Are local groups that are supportive of sustainability, rather than statewide or national organisations, more likely to be recognised by policy makers in sustainable cities than in the comparison cities? One might expect that if policy makers seek to be responsive to their local constituents, and if local nonprofits are seen as better representing the views of those constituents, then greater awareness of such groups should be found in the sustainable cities. The second organisational characteristic focuses on whether the supportive group has a mission that is decidedly related to the environment or sustainability, or is the mission more broadly defined?

Column 4 in Table 3 shows that there is a fairly strong tendency for cities with “local” nonprofits supporting sustainability to be more likely to pursue sustainability policies than cities where the supportive nonprofits are statewide or national in scope. One might infer from this that local nonprofits have greater credibility with policymakers than nonprofits from outside of the city. This could be because policymakers do not believe such groups actually represent the views of their local constituents. So the Sierra Club or Green Builders of America may not carry the same cache with local policymakers as a home-grown nonprofit like Walk Sacramento or Sustainable Seattle.

Column 5 in Table 3 shows that the nonprofit groups that are supportive of sustainability are more likely to be dedicated to the environment in the sustainable cities than in the comparison group. In other words, the nonprofits that support sustainability in the comparison cities tend to be groups whose mission is not necessarily directly related to the environment. This includes various neighbourhood associations, groups that represent some business constituency such as the local Chamber of Commerce or organisation of realtors, and local community development corporations.

Nonprofit support for sustainability and its opposition

The analysis so far has focused mainly on the role of the nonprofit community in support of sustainability. Yet, as a political matter, there is another side to the issue. Certainly, not all local organisations, nonprofit or otherwise, are totally supportive of the pursuit of sustainability. Whether because of the perception that the pursuit of sustainability might cost the local government too much money, as with green building applied to municipal facilities, because of costs that might be imposed on others, as with higher parking fees or restrictions on new construction, or because it might imply changes in lifestyle, as with efforts to increase housing density (Groc 2007), there often is plenty of opposition to the pursuit of sustainability. The most vocal opposition tends to come from the private sector – developers, builders, and groups that represent local businesses, such as the Chamber of Commerce. In the nonprofit community, there are many organisations that, in a sense, represent the same interests as those in the private sector.

This is probably especially true of nonprofit organisations that are focused on producing economic and community development. There is certainly nothing that ensures that these kinds of nonprofits would oppose sustainability, and indeed many are formed with the mission of doing economic development in a sustainable way (Portney 2007). Nevertheless, understanding the kinds of organisations that stand in opposition to sustainability would help us understand how much of this opposition may be rooted in the nonprofit sector, and how the supportive part of the nonprofit sector compares with the opposition. One way of getting at this is to ask about groups that oppose sustainability. To do this, respondents were asked:

21. Are there specific citizen, neighborhood, business, or nonprofit groups that have met with you over the last year that have sought to **oppose** specific programs or policies that are

consistent with livability, sustainability or sustainable economic development? If so, what were the names of the groups?

The verbatim responses to this question are presented in Table A2. Most respondents did not provide the names of any organisations, but about one-quarter of all the respondents reported at least one specific organisation that opposes the pursuit of sustainability. In what may seem on its face to be a bit of a paradox, cities that have established sustainability programmes are more likely to see such opposition. Of course, the reason for this is that the comparison cities, having no sustainability policies, have no omnibus and few specific policies or programmes for groups to oppose, so the sustainable cities naturally will mobilise greater opposition. Overall, however, among those reporting opposition, the vast majority of that opposition comes from the private sector, and nonprofits representing the private sector, especially from real estate development and homebuilding. Other types of groups were reported as opponents of sustainability, but clearly they are less prevalent than those that seek to develop the land, a result not altogether unexpected.

Local nonprofit groups and the pursuit of sustainability: a summary

The analysis here addresses an issue concerning the relationship between the fabric of the nonprofit sector in cities and the willingness of local government and political leaders to pursue long-term sustainability goals. This is fundamentally a political issue, going to the heart of how and why cities are governed the way they are. In this case, the underlying issue is whether the local nonprofit sector has the ability to represent interests that support local sustainability, and if so, whether that sector offers an effective counterbalance to alternative views about economic development and local public policy.

The evidence here does lend support to the notion that sustainable cities – cities that are trying to become more sustainable as a matter of local public policy – are different with respect to their nonprofit sectors. For one, the nonprofit sector seems better-developed, especially with regard to how frequently policy makers interact with the sector. For another, there is a greater likelihood that the nonprofit sector will include at least one homegrown group that supports and advocates for sustainability or for the environment in some fashion. And when such groups exist in cities, there is a strong tendency for traditional views of economic development – that any kind of development is good development – to be displaced by a more constrained view of economic development. The implication, tempered below, is that the nonprofit sector represents an extraordinarily important component of cities' decisions to try to become more sustainable. If there is temptation to see the correlation between the presence of nonprofit groups and the adoption of sustainability policies as statistical artefact, this paper offers evidence to the contrary. As a matter of local public policy, if cities are to make progress on sustainability, climate protection, smart growth, and other environmental areas, then local nonprofit advocacy would seem to be an important influence.

Of course, what this analysis cannot do is sort out the causal underpinnings of governance for sustainability. The data may support an inference that organising a nonprofit in support of sustainability will greatly improve the chances that the city will adopt sustainability policies. And the analysis has some strong hints as to what kinds of local nonprofits are more likely to produce this result. There is evidence that local homegrown groups are probably more likely to be effective than statewide or national groups working in a local community. And there is a hint that groups whose missions are dedicated to environmental and sustainability issues are probably more likely to be effective

than groups whose missions are more general. What is less clear is whether the character of the local governance regime – the informal interactions and influences that affect policy making – pre-determines the kind of influence that pro-sustainability nonprofits can exert. And these strong hints and alternative possibilities suggest fertile ground for future exploration.

Future analysis will need to build a more comprehensive picture of the local nonprofit sector in different communities. It will need to understand the subtle political and policy advocacy roles played by the nonprofit sector in setting the local public agenda. In order to build this understanding, the character of the nonprofit sector and its relationship to the private and public sectors need to be better understood. Future analysis will need to take a much closer look at the specific nonprofit organisations that operate in these communities. The ultimate goal is to describe the conditions that seem to lend themselves to creating a political context – perhaps even a governance regime – in which local political leaders are willing and able to pursue sustainability.

Notes

1. Nashville, Louisville, Portland, Tucson, and Albuquerque are also in this population range; Portland, Tucson, and Albuquerque have official sustainability policies; Nashville and Louisville do not.
2. Independent rankings of 50 US cities according to their level of sustainability by SustainLane reveals that the five “sustainable cities” carry the following ranks: Seattle, 3; Boston, 6; Denver, 11; Milwaukee, 12; Sacramento, 14; Atlanta, 19; and Kansas City, 20. Comparison cities are ranked as follows: Charlotte, 35; Fort Worth, 39; Memphis, 46; Las Vegas, 47; Oklahoma City, 49. The average ranking for the sustainable cities is 12.1, and for the comparison cities is 42.3. See <http://www.sustainlane.com/us-city-rankings/overall-rankings> [Accessed 22 January 2010].
3. The issue of the relationship between income and sustainability policies across a large number of US cities has been investigated elsewhere, with mixed results. See Kahn (2006), O’Connell (2008) and Portney (2008) for a brief review of this issue.
4. The mailing included the questionnaire, a one page letter on university letterhead explaining why the respondent was receiving the survey, a prepaid response tracking postcard on which they could write their name so as to remain anonymous if so desired, and a prepaid return envelope. The postcard was also used to determine eligibility to receive the free book and to be entered into the iPod raffle. After 2 weeks, a postcard reminder was sent to all respondents who had not yet returned a questionnaire. This postcard reminded the respondent that they had received our questionnaire and asked them to complete and return it. If they had not received a questionnaire, we asked them to contact us so that we could send them a replacement questionnaire. About 3 weeks after this step, a second copy of the questionnaire was sent to those who we believed had still not returned a questionnaire. All of these steps were in accordance with the standard political science literature advising the best methods by which to follow in order to maximise response rates (Dillman 2009, pp. 234–271). After speaking with a small number of respective respondents who expressed a preference for answering questionnaires over the Internet, an online version of the questionnaire was subsequently created with the assistance of the university’s Office of Institutional Research and Evaluation. Email messages were sent to city councillors and city administrators who had not returned the initial mail questionnaire, offering them the option of doing the questionnaire online. The intent of the online version of the questionnaire was to offer an alternative to the mail questionnaire for those who had not returned the latter. The online questionnaire induced six additional responses.
5. Thirty-six of the 64 responses (56.3%) were from city councillors and 28 (43.7%) were from city administrators and Chamber of Commerce officials. Elected legislators of all types are a particularly difficult population to survey because they are often concerned about creating a paper trail on issue positions. Even though we promised respondents anonymity and confidentiality, it is difficult to overcome respondent concerns.

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Appendix

Table A1. Verbatim responses to Questions 20 and 21 and names of organisations promoting and opposing sustainability.

Groups supporting sustainability	Responses		
	<i>N</i>	Per cent (%)	Per cent of cases (%)
Sierra Club	8	4.2	12.5
Clean air coalition	1	0.5	1.6
Commonwealth housing group	1	0.5	1.6
Rocky Mountain climate org	1	0.5	1.6
Green cities project Denver	1	0.5	1.6
ASPO-USA/ENVCO/Western Reserve Association	1	0.5	1.6
Various neighbourhood block watch groups	1	0.5	1.6
Parents against lead	1	0.5	1.6
Layton Blvd West neighbors	1	0.5	1.6
Greater KC LISC	1	0.5	1.6
Communities creating opportunity (CCO)	1	0.5	1.6
Realtors	1	0.5	1.6
Landlords association	1	0.5	1.6
People for Puget Sound	3	1.6	4.7
Futurewise	2	1.0	3.1
Smokefree Denver	1	0.5	1.6
Sustainable Seattle	1	0.5	1.6
Washington League of Conservation Voters	1	0.5	1.6
Northwest Coalition	1	0.5	1.6
Chamber of Commerce	2	1.0	3.1
Green Builders of America	1	0.5	1.6
EDC	1	0.5	1.6
Walk Sacramento	1	0.5	1.6
Environmental Council of Sacramento	1	0.5	1.6
Atlanta Neighborhood Development Partners	1	0.5	1.6
Buckhead coalition	1	0.5	1.6
Various religious organisations	1	0.5	1.6

(Continued)

Table A1. Continued.

Groups supporting sustainability	Responses		
	<i>N</i>	Per cent (%)	Per cent of cases (%)
Airport-Gateway Association	1	0.5	1.6
27 Business District Association	1	0.5	1.6
13 District Association	1	0.5	1.6
Economic Strategy Group (union reps)	1	0.5	1.6
Cherokee	1	0.5	1.6
Centro Salud Familiar la Fe	1	0.5	1.6
Neighbourhood associations	2	1.0	3.1
Save the Mountain Coalition	1	0.5	1.6
Arlington Heights neighborhood	1	0.5	1.6
Lake Como Res Council	1	0.5	1.6
Streams and valleys; Rails to trails	2	1.0	3.1
Green Guard	1	0.5	1.6
Art and Film District Association in west downtown	1	0.5	1.6
ECOS	1	0.5	1.6
KC Area Development Council	1	0.5	1.6
Life Science Institute	1	0.5	1.6
Regional transit authority	1	0.5	1.6
Juvenile justice	1	0.5	1.6
Various organisations	2	1.0	3.1
LULAC	1	0.5	1.6
Paso del Norte group	2	1.0	3.1
La Mujer Obrera	1	0.5	1.6
Citizen Peak Oil concerns	1	0.5	1.6
OKC Beautiful	1	0.5	1.6
Greater OKC Chamber of Commerce	1	0.5	1.6
Transportation choices coalition	1	0.5	1.6
Waterfront for all	1	0.5	1.6
Office of sustainability	1	0.5	1.6
Catawba Land Conservancy	1	0.5	1.6
AIA	4	2.1	6.3
Outdoor Nevada	1	0.5	1.6
Lied Institute for Real Estate Studies	1	0.5	1.6
DC environmental coalition	1	0.5	1.6
Anti-tobacco alliance	1	0.5	1.6
McMad against McDonalds	1	0.5	1.6
Gathering Place women's shelter	1	0.5	1.6
Atlanta Development Authority	1	0.5	1.6
Central Atlanta Progress	1	0.5	1.6
Public Service Board	1	0.5	1.6
Alchemists	1	0.5	1.6
Sacramento Area Council of Governments	1	0.5	1.6
Cooper-Young Community Development Corporation	2	1.0	3.1
Memphis Area Chamber of Commerce	2	1.0	3.1
Memphis Historic Neighbors	1	0.5	1.6
Cooper-Young Business Association	1	0.5	1.6
Atlanta Planning Advisory Board	1	0.5	1.6
Neighborhood planning unit	1	0.5	1.6
Carolina Ecocrescent	1	0.5	1.6
East Ballard Community Association	1	0.5	1.6
Peoples' Waterfront Coalition	1	0.5	1.6
Fenway Civic Association	1	0.5	1.6

(Continued)

Table A1. Continued.

Groups supporting sustainability	Responses		
	<i>N</i>	Per cent (%)	Per cent of cases (%)
Center City Partners	1	0.5	1.6
Greenville Homeowners Association	1	0.5	1.6
Walmart	1	0.5	1.6
Southeast Fort Worth Inc	2	1.0	3.1
Greater Forth Worth Black Chamber	1	0.5	1.6
Near Southeast CDC	1	0.5	1.6
No group mentioned	87	45.3	135.9
Total	192	100.0	300.0

Table A2. Groups opposing sustainability.

Groups opposing sustainability	Responses		
	<i>N</i>	Per cent (%)	Per cent of cases (%)
1. Real estate building industry coalition	1	0.5	1.6
2. Low income housing developers	1	0.5	1.6
3. Tavern league of WI	1	0.5	1.6
4. Restaurant Association of WI	1	0.5	1.6
5. Communities creating opportunity	1	0.5	1.6
6. Citizens for Redbridge Road	1	0.5	1.6
7. Many citizens	1	0.5	1.6
8. Xcel Energy Inc.	1	0.5	1.6
9. Downtown Seattle Association	1	0.5	1.6
10. Building Owners and Managers Association	1	0.5	1.6
11. For-profit developers	4	2.1	6.3
12. Port of Seattle	1	0.5	1.6
13. Manufacturing and Industrial Council	1	0.5	1.6
14. El Paso Association of Builders	2	1.0	3.1
15. Neighbourhood associations	1	0.5	1.6
16. Northwest Regional Alliance	1	0.5	1.6
17. Various businesses	1	0.5	1.6
18. Downtown El Paso	1	0.5	1.6
19. Banks	2	1.0	3.1
20. Greater OKC Homebuilders Association	1	0.5	1.6
21. Downtown Denver Partnership	1	0.5	1.6
22. Unions	1	0.5	1.6
23. Downtown revitalisation group	1	0.5	1.6
24. Homebuilders Association	1	0.5	1.6
25. No group mentioned	163	84.9	254.7
Total	192	100.0	300.0