

Reno Brings Sustainability to the Wild West

New Leadership and Changing Demographics Turn the High Desert Green

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Photo: City of Reno

Great Reno Balloon Race

The Great Reno Balloon Race is the largest free hot-air ballooning event in the world. From its humble beginnings in 1982 with just 20 balloons, the annual four-day event now boasts as many as 100 balloons. The 2019 event is slated for Sept. 6-8.



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Lynne Barker is sustainability manager for the City of Reno, Nev.

Posted: Wednesday, January 2, 2019 2:33 pm | Updated: 11:18 am, Fri Jan 4, 2019.

Reno Brings Sustainability to the Wild West By Randy Rodgers
Publisher & Executive Editor

In a region with one of the highest concentrations of ski resorts in the U.S. and a water supply that depends on mountain snowpack, the climate trends in Reno, Nev., have not been promising.

“Reno is the fastest warming city in the nation,” said Lynne Barker, the city’s sustainability manager. “Our average annual temperature has increased more than five degrees over the past five decades.”

The hotter, dryer climate means longer and more severe droughts, less water for ranching and farming, and more frequent and intense wildfires, Barker warned in a recent report on the city’s resilience. As Reno begins to feel the increasingly dire impacts of climate change, a new administration buoyed by changing demographics in the electorate is coalescing around the principles of sustainability.

Barker is Reno’s first sustainability manager, hired after a new, more progressive administration took over city government in 2015. That year, the Reno City Council and newly elected Mayor Hillary Schieve voted unanimously to join the Compact of Mayors, now the [Global Covenant of Mayors](#), an international coalition of mayors and city officials committed to reducing local greenhouse gas emissions and promoting resilience to climate change. Among Barker’s first assignments was to meet the requirements of that covenant, starting with the city’s first greenhouse gas inventory, conducted in partnership with the University of Nevada-Reno, Washoe County Health District, and the Reno-Tahoe Airport Authority.

In 2017, Reno was ranked the 31st greenest city in America by [WalletHub](#) after a comparison of the top 100 cities. Later that year, the city was certified as a 3-STAR Community by [STAR Communities](#), a rating system that helps cities track their progress toward sustainability on a 5-point scale. Following the certification, Barker and her team drafted [Reno Resilience](#), the city’s 2017 Sustainability Report, which benchmarked current metrics and outlined the city’s evolution toward 44 objectives in STAR’s seven thematic goal areas.

Barker, who was director of the STAR Community Index project when it was being launched by ICLEI USA, the U.S. Green Building Council and the Center for American Progress from 2008 to 2011, said she's proud of the Reno Resilience report for its emphasis on outreach to the community.

"We really tried to communicate to residents and businesses what STAR Communities is, what it covers, why it's important and why they should care," Barker said. "...We worked really hard on telling that story." She said the report has received accolades from STAR Communities and has been emulated by other cities in the program.

The Reno Resilience report also identified the alignment between the STAR Communities goals and the goals in the city's newly adopted Master Plan, [ReImagineReno](#), which will guide Reno's development over the next 20 years.

Reno, with a population of just under 250,000, is part of the Reno-Sparks metropolitan area in western Nevada, home to about half a million people. The area's primary source of water is the Truckee River, which flows out of Lake Tahoe 22 miles south of the city. The region sits in the "rain shadow" of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and therefore relies mostly on snowmelt for its water. The snow also helps fuel the economy, with more than a dozen ski resorts in the area. But, besides bringing hotter, dryer summers, climate change is also bringing more rain and less snow in winters, Barker said. That reduces the snowpack even more and causes dangerous flash floods.

Gaming and tourism dominated Reno's economy in the 20th Century, but in recent years the city has seen a boom in the technology sector with companies like Apple, Amazon, Rackspace, Blockchain and Switch bringing new distribution and data centers to the area. The [Tahoe Reno Industrial Center](#) is promoted as the largest industrial park in the world and is home to the 5.8-million-square-foot [Tesla Gigafactory](#) and Switch's [SuperNAP](#) campus, one of the largest data centers in the world. More than 100 companies operate warehouse, logistics and fulfillment centers in the industrial complex, including such companies as PetSmart, Home Depot, Walmart and others.

Reno's greenhouse gas inventory showed the city had already made progress, decreasing its carbon footprint by nearly 14 percent between 2008 and 2014, largely as a result of more fuel efficient vehicles, increased use of renewable energy and converting power plants from burning coal to cleaner natural gas. But, Nevada voters have demanded more: They approved a [ballot measure](#) in November that will require electric utilities in the state to acquire 50 percent of their electricity from renewable sources by 2030. If the measure is approved by voters again in 2020 the mandate will be written into the Nevada Constitution.

Barker said NV Energy, the state's primary electric utility, has remained neutral on the ballot measure, but has already committed to doubling its current renewable energy output by 2023 and plans to eventually become 100 percent renewable. It currently generates 24 percent of its electricity from renewable sources and only 8 percent from coal.

According to a 2017 [report](#), NV Energy says coal will no longer be in use in southern Nevada and will represent less than 3 percent of its generating capacity throughout the state by the end of 2019. In 2018, the utility announced plans to add more than 1,300 megawatts of solar energy to its existing portfolio, along with the state's first battery storage facility that will have the capacity to store up to 100 megawatts. The additions will bring NV Energy's total renewable energy portfolio – which includes geothermal, hydro, biomass, wind and solar facilities – to more than 3.2 gigawatts of power generation.

"Our community is very invested in sustainability. It's also a changing community," Barker said, describing a rapidly growing population with increasing numbers of university students, retirees and a Latino population that now accounts for nearly 25 percent of residents, up from 19 percent in 2000.

Reno, known since the 1920s as “the Biggest Little City in the World,” is beginning to experience some growing pains. The prospect of good jobs and relatively low housing costs have attracted newcomers from northern California, where an affordable housing crisis and recent wildfires have displaced many. Concerns over the “Californiacation” of the city have sparked debates about “gentrification, traffic and lifestyle changes,” according to the [Reno Gazette Journal](#).

“With big-city culture, comes more creative food, dining, shopping and recreation options, but also more expenses,” bemoaned City Life Reporter Mike Higdon. “Reno’s cost of living is already high while house and rental prices outpace wages.”

Barker said social equity is a growing concern for city officials. “Just this past year the mayor and city council adopted our first-ever diversity plan,” she said. The plan provides guidance on how the city can diversify its workforce and “address the issues of institutional racism to make sure that we are providing services and making investments that are equitable,” Barker said. The city now publishes its literature in both English and Spanish, and provides Spanish translators when citizens call for city services. She said the draft Sustainability & Climate Action Plan for 2018-2025 emphasizes the equitable allocation of resources, services and opportunities, specifically access to fresh, healthy foods, tree canopy and bikeshare services.

Barker credited the efforts of a workforce development coalition that includes the University of Nevada-Reno, the Washoe County School District and the Economic Development Authority of Western Nevada (EDAWN) for improving access to a quality education throughout the region. She said the school district’s [Every Child. By Name and Face. to Graduation](#) program was particularly instrumental in increasing Reno’s high school graduation rate from 66 percent in 2012 to 84 percent in 2017.

Barker said Reno is also a nationally recognized leader in community policing. The Reno Police Department trains its officers in [community-oriented policing](#) and problem solving, which involves partnering with neighborhood groups, schools, recreation centers and other groups to build strong relationships and help fix the source of criminal activity rather than just arresting and prosecuting offenders. The department has a community ride-along program, a downloadable mobile phone app, a Neighborhood Watch program and conducts regular presentations throughout the city. The mobile app contains staff profiles, news, incident reports, navigation tools to find the nearest station, police contact information, local crime statistics and information on how to engage with the department.

Barker said each of the city’s five wards has a citizen advisory board that meets regularly and provides input to city leadership and the police department.

According to Barker, Reno’s key sustainability priorities in the next few years will include:

- **Greening the Energy Supply** - Transition the local energy supply for both transportation and non-mobile sources toward the use of renewable, less carbon-intensive, and less toxic alternatives. Increase distributed, renewable energy generation 15 percent by 2025 through streamlined permits, reduced fees, and technical assistance.
- **Reducing Emissions through Energy Efficiency** - Convert 90 percent of streetlights and traffic signals to LED by 2025. Implement the city’s newly adopted [Building Energy Use Benchmarking and Transparency Policy](#) for large commercial, industrial and multifamily buildings.
- **Reducing Transportation Emissions** - Adopt form based code to improve predictability and quality of compact and complete, walkable, and mixed-use centers and corridors. Install bikeways, bicycle parking, lockers and shower facilities to encourage the use of bicycles for commuting. Reduce city fleet emissions 30 percent by 2025 by transitioning to electric or low emission vehicles where feasible.

• **Developing a Pathway to Zero Waste** - Increase the recycling rate from 30 percent to 50 percent by 2025 and 75 percent by 2050. Partner with industry to implement a construction and demolition waste recycling program, a local green waste and food waste recycling facility, and implement curbside collection of compostables.

• **Expanding Access to Healthy, Local Food** - Allow community gardens, demonstration gardens, small-scale agriculture, community supported agriculture (CSA), the raising of some animals for food purposes, and other efforts. Incentivize development of grocery stores in areas determined as food deserts, and allow for mobile food pantries for underserved communities.

• **Increasing Reno's Tree Canopy** - Expand the city's [ReLeaf Reno](#) program, which accepts donations from the public to plant and maintain trees on private and public property, especially in low-income neighborhoods. (Reno, which is in a "high desert" region of the country, currently has a tree canopy of only 5.2 percent.)

• **Reducing Water Consumption** - Promote the responsible use of water in partnership with Truckee Meadows Water Authority, the city's water utility. Enforce existing and implement new stormwater management practices and standards to protect water quality, including Low Impact Development (LID) standards for new development, green infrastructure, and sustainable, site development standards. Expand use of waste water for beneficial reuse.

Sustainable City Network will host a free, 1-hour webinar on Thursday, Jan. 24 on the sustainability initiatives of the city of Reno, Nev. Presented by Reno Sustainability Manager Lynne Barker, the presentation will describe the sustainability principles reinforced in citywide goals and policies adopted in the City of Reno Master Plan, as well as the more specific strategies identified in the city's Sustainability and Climate Action Plan. Register at <http://sCityNetwork.com/Reno>.

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