

## **SustainLane US City Rankings: Overview**

There is an old saying, “if it isn’t measured, it doesn’t exist.”

In November 2004, SustainLane began to take a look at 25 US cities across 12 major categories, to measure their relative levels of sustainability, and in the process create the most comprehensive study done to date on the topic. We found an abundance of data and information, but it was fragmented, not always relevant, and presented challenges for use in a comparative analysis. One of our biggest discoveries was that many cities themselves had not found a way to look at the various pieces of information as an integrated system.

Much to our surprise, it wasn’t difficult to see how hard it would be for individual cities to compare their own efforts at sustainability with those of their peers in a meaningful manner. Besides our own curiosity, we thought the people running the cities would want to know how they were doing and so would the millions of those living in and around the cities themselves.

Cities across America have a lot going on in terms of sustainable practices, so we set out to measure, compare, and rank these cities, thus creating the SustainLane US City Rankings. SustainLane has chosen an in-depth and ongoing analysis of American cities, with an applications focus. We discovered and documented new ideas that are creatively addressing regional challenges including clean air, water, local foods, and city revitalizations employing green building techniques. We also wanted to find out what our cities are doing to address global issues like climate change, loss of biodiversity and environmental toxins.

By May 2005, we had collected information from dozens of cities, non-governmental organizations and experts in other organizations, and completed our inaugural SustainLane US City Rankings, a peer-reviewed, non-partisan study that promises to set the standard for measuring how successful American cities are in implementing sustainable practices. (See “Methodology” at left for complete details on our research protocol).

So, what does it mean that Portland ranked #2 in our study, or that New York ranked #7, or that Albuquerque ranked #23? These final total rankings were developed by averaging each city’s performance across 12 main performance areas. Portland’s #2 ranking came from its total average of “4.9” across all 12 areas (the lower score the better), while Albuquerque averaged “16.20” across the same areas. In other words Portland was more than three times as sustainable than Albuquerque in terms of the categories we analyzed. Is Portland, then, sustainable or Albuquerque not sustainable? Not really, as we believe that all efforts toward sustainability are good ones, and that to truly reach full sustainability, implying a zero impact to our environment, is a noble goal that will have many iterations in our communities. It does mean, however, that Portland’s commitment to implementing sustainable practices has met with more success, and that Portland is taking a more aggressive stance on driving toward the goal of creating a truly sustainable city.

Which brings us to a commonly asked question, how does SustainLane define sustainability? The SustainLane US City Rankings focus on healthy regional economic development, vibrant communities and quality of life measurements. Our viewpoint of sustainable practices is weighted toward ideas borrowed from our natural systems and implemented in our cities, particularly those geared toward the revitalization of our economy and public health. SustainLane also wants to celebrate the inspirational leaders showing us the way to a better future.

Specifically, we take a look at some of the newer areas generating exciting economic growth opportunities, including the US Green Building Council's LEED (Leadership in Environmental & Energy Design) building certification, the fastest growing construction category in the United States. There are several high-rise office buildings planned in New York City pursuing LEED's highest (gold and platinum) standards, including the 2.1-million-square foot 56-story Bank of America Tower in Manhattan. With each such LEED project come new technologies, products and services, which benefit the local economy of that metropolitan area, displacing less sustainable industries. Unsustainable enterprises will soon become dinosaurs if they do not quickly learn to adopt more sustainable practices. LEED standards will soon be expanded to include community planning and the residential market, and SustainLane will be right there following these developments, providing measures of success, implementation stories and shared learning opportunities.

Another exciting trend is the national explosion of farmers markets, which according to the US Dept. of Agriculture grew at a clip of 106% from 1994 through 2004. Farmers markets generate \$888 million in yearly revenue across the United States (USDA 2005 estimate), and work to bring the consumer in direct contact with those that grow their food. This trend quickens the movement to understanding the complex connections between our daily lifestyles and consumptive habits (the food we prepare and eat every day). As communities become more knowledgeable about sustainability issues, daily individual practices change, and this citizen engagement in turn helps cities move closer to becoming cleaner and more productive environments.

We think Mayor Gavin Newsom of San Francisco (#1 overall in our study) got it right when he told us, "Sustainability is important not only for protecting citizens' health and ensuring a great quality of life here in San Francisco, but also for boosting the local economy with jobs and services in everything from clean technologies to fresh food and green building products."

Sustainability concerns are driving the development of renewable energy for buildings and clean fuels for vehicles. In Berkeley, California, 200 city trucks burn 100% biodiesel fuel from used cooking oil. Meanwhile, other cities are examining and deploying alternative fuels from corn and agricultural byproducts in vehicle fleets numbering in the thousands, significantly cutting US dependence on increasingly costly fossil fuel sources and reducing local air pollution.

In addition to air and water quality, local food, LEED buildings, renewable energy/climate, and green fleets, SustainLane looked at waste diversion rates. These programs now include not only recycling but also highly innovative composting systems linking city restaurants with regional farmers and vineyards. And, we analyzed planning, zoning, and land use, which impact everything from the availability of recreation opportunities to how much people are dependent, or not dependent, on driving everywhere for everything.

Two final categories, city innovation and knowledgebase, examined how well cities are developing everything from new financial and behavioral incentives, to communications and information management processes and technologies.

Each of our study categories are connected to energy use, which in turn affects the production of greenhouse gases, the root cause of global climate change. For instance, even our tap water must be pumped many miles or hundreds of miles to our cities and our homes, requiring massive amounts of energy for some locations.

Our 12 study categories also relate to local air pollution emissions, as they impact our health day-to-day as well as on a lifetime basis. People's health and city sustainability seem to be closely linked. Fresh local food, for instance, has been shown to have higher nutritional value than food that is packaged, stored and shipped. Food from farmers markets and community gardens also has a milder impact on the environment than food that is processed, packaged, transported and sold on a global basis. Cutting "food miles" reduces the life cycle energy and packaging required; this diminishes air pollution, resource use and ecosystem impacts from fossil fuel dependence.

SustainLane US City Ranking's winner San Francisco is a leader in many areas, as is a close 2<sup>nd</sup> place finisher Portland, Oregon. It is important to note, however, that even the cities that did not fare as well in overall rankings were leaders in some categories. Take Pittsburgh, which was #19 overall in our study. Pittsburgh was #1 in local food and agriculture, with the best overall combined per capita rate of farmers markets and community gardens for any US city. In our accompanying write-ups, you can read more about how these and other top-ranking cities did. We are confident, as the cities seem to be, that the most important achievements have yet to occur.

"All these cities are winners," Portland Mayor Tom Potter said of the top ten cities in the SustainLane City Rankings. "All of them are on their own taking steps to make their environment sustainable, to ensure that the food we eat, the buildings we go into, the streets we're on, that they are safe, clean and renewable. I think over a period of time these things will become standard, rather than the exception."

Let us know what you think. Our intention is to continually improve the SustainLane US City Rankings, and we want to include your perspective in our work.

1. How did we do? We're dedicated to maintaining our study as the standard for measuring city sustainability, and will be updating our study on an annual basis.

Did we overlook anything? We need to cite data that is freely available, unbiased, and consistent across the nation and frequently updated (see methodology for other data requirements).

2. Tell us what's happening in your city that we should know about, whether or not your city was included in our study. We will be expanding the SustainLane US City Rankings significantly next year to the top 50 cities in America, and will be adding a best practices section to highlight a path for implementation.

As Portland's Mayor Potter observed, "This kind of competition is what creates change in our society. Let's start a cool competition with Chicago and other cities. We don't mind sharing what we know and what we've learned, but let's throw down a green gauntlet."