

An Analysis of Environmental Organizations in Milwaukee

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Introduction

When I first moved to Milwaukee in June 2011, I had no idea that I would get involved in such a vibrant community of environmental and social activism. While searching for a place to live, I found my housemate Kate Hanford on the Transition Milwaukee website. Kate had moved to Milwaukee two years earlier to be an intern at Growing Power, and she was subsequently hired as their director of production. She was living in Riverwest, an economically poor but culturally rich neighborhood in Milwaukee. While exploring the beautiful parks, rivers, and lakes in the area, I stumbled upon the Urban Ecology Center, where Transition Milwaukee holds their meetings. After a fun-filled summer making friends with people involved in all three of these organizations, I began this project to gain a deeper understanding of the people I had met and the practices of these three key organizations. I spent Wednesday afternoons with children in Washington Park at the Urban Ecology Center, I worked Saturday mornings at Growing Power's main farm and in the evening attended potlucks and parties with friends who worked there, and on Monday evenings I attended Transition Milwaukee hub meetings and worked on organizing their mess of data into something useful. The volunteer work I did balanced out my day job of electrical and computer engineering by providing a more creative and people-oriented outlet, and I learned a lot about community from all the people who helped me with this project. I want to thank all the people I got a chance to connect with, and I hope to spread the good work they do in Milwaukee to the rest of the country and beyond.

In this project, I seek to address the question of how three key organizations are driving the future of Milwaukee environmentalism, as well as how each organization might achieve its goals more effectively. Ultimately, I hope that the organizations will use my suggestions to strengthen the environmental movement in Milwaukee as a whole. Two of the three organizations I selected for case studies, Growing Power and the Urban Ecology Center, are well-known in Milwaukee for their ability to draw in both local citizens and outside visitors. They are clearly the most influential environmental groups in the city, and they form strong ties with many other environmental groups. I selected Transition Milwaukee as the third group because of its youth as an organization and its goal to be the

center of a network of environmental organizations. In order for Transition Milwaukee to move forward as the networking agent it wants to be, it will need to form strong ties with the most influential groups in Milwaukee. A formalized relationship would be mutually beneficial for all three organizations, and such a relationship would create powerful possibilities for the future of environmentalism in Milwaukee.

Methodology

To conduct this analysis of Milwaukee environmentalism, I volunteered many hours with each of the three organizations I selected, interviewed multiple people from each organization, and researched online and in books. Interviewees were informed of the project and will receive a copy of the final version. At Growing Power, an urban farm, I mainly shoveled and sifted soil for local food production. At the Urban Ecology Center, a teaching facility for urban children and adults, I canoed, birdwatched, and played educational games with children in the Young Scientists program. For Transition Milwaukee, an organization focused on creating resilient communities in the face of peak oil and climate change, I represented the organization at a table at various sustainability events and I organized the data from their website and mailing list into a useful format for their leaders to follow up with individuals and neighborhoods. As a researcher, I asked myself what people were doing and why they did it any time I worked with one of the three organizations. This helped me understand how each organization is working to accomplish its goals and how they could better achieve those goals. I took notes during each interview and whenever I came up with suggestions for an organization, often after an informal but insightful conversation with a friend. After interviewing, I used the organizations' websites and news articles to supplement my evidence.

Brief Environmental History of Milwaukee

Water is a plentiful resource in Milwaukee because the city borders Lake Michigan, the sixth largest freshwater lake in the world¹. Frederick Law Olmsted -- designer of Central Park, the U.S. Capitol, and many other parks -- created beautiful parks along Milwaukee's rivers and lakes in the 19th century that drew people to gather, play, and swim. However, this changed when manufacturing

1 Great Lakes Information Network, "Lake Michigan Facts and Figures," <http://www.great-lakes.net/lakes/ref/michfact.html> (Feb. 2005).

boomed in Milwaukee, creating jobs at the expense of environmental and worker health. Industrialization changed the landscape of Milwaukee significantly, polluting the rivers and lakes so much that people ceased to swim in them. In spring of 1993, a waterborne pathogen called cryptosporidium was transferred to Lake Michigan from Europe, and the resulting disease infected approximately 400,000 people, hospitalized approximately 4000 people, and killed approximately 100 people who relied on the lake for drinking water². Despite this life-threatening event, citizens of Milwaukee have not taken action to clean up the lake. Although the lake is an element of nature that is integral to Milwaukee culture and appears in many names of neighborhoods, restaurants, and even running races, the cleanliness of that water is not a main concern.

Aldo Leopold is one of the main figureheads of Wisconsin environmentalism. Leopold was an ecologist and environmental philosopher at the University of Wisconsin in Madison who pushed many environmental issues from 1924 to 1948, leaving “a legacy that political leaders of all ideological persuasions in Wisconsin would claim for their own.”³ In the finale to his *Land County Almanac*, Leopold described a “land ethic,” where he asserted that people play an important role in protecting their environment as part of their community.⁴ This land ethic, which keeps individuals connected to and responsible for their environment, fits with the strong sense of place in Milwaukee and in Wisconsin in general. While a culture of protecting the cleanliness of the lake may not be prominent, a culture of protecting the wilderness that still exists certainly is.

Gaylord Nelson, a Wisconsin senator, was a primary leader of the Earth Day movement in 1970. Leopold's legacy and the culture of environmental conservation in Milwaukee helped lead Nelson to push for influential laws like the Clean Air Act and the Wilderness Act which still protect communities today. As Robert F. Kennedy Jr. said in the foreword of Nelson's recent book *Beyond Earth Day*, “Gaylord Nelson understood that federal laws were necessary to protect small communities and individuals because large corporations can so easily dominate the state political landscapes.”⁵ Although Milwaukee was once filled with industrial corporations, most of those corporations have vacated, and have been replaced by small communities with distinct personalities

2 Morris, Dr. Robert D., *The Blue Death: Disease, Disaster, and the Water We Drink* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007) 214.

3 Thomas R. Huffman, *Protectors of the Land and Water* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994) 6-7.

4 “Leopold’s Land Ethic.” <www.aldoleopold.org>

5 Gaylord Nelson, *Beyond Earth Day: Fulfilling the Promise* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002) xii.

and a strong sense of place. The people in these small communities are well-connected and economically poor, so they are in a prime position to come together as a group to improve the lives of everyone.

Volunteerism climate of Milwaukee

Volunteerism in Milwaukee is strikingly widespread. There are nonprofit organizations of all types, and people are not hesitant to join. According to Volunteer Center Manager Bonnie Andrews, based on records kept by non-profit organizations, "In Milwaukee, 32% of the people volunteer, which ranks us 8th on the list of cities for volunteerism."⁶ Andrews was interviewed by Radio Milwaukee, a listener-supported radio station that does several series of stories on volunteerism, such as Meet the Need and Make a Difference, which highlight the work of over 50 volunteer organizations. Milwaukee companies sponsor employee volunteer days as part of the Days of Caring program with United Way of Greater Milwaukee, and the Volunteer Center of Greater Milwaukee provides an easy way for people to connect with organizations and volunteer.

In addition, Milwaukee is home to several universities and colleges that promote service learning. This program in which students volunteer 15-40 hours as part of a class provides support for the city's many nonprofit organizations. The Urban Ecology Center gets service learners in classes such as Urban Education who work with children in the Young Scientists program, Growing Power gets service learners from various ecology classes who prepare soil and wash vegetables, and Transition Milwaukee gets service learners from architecture classes who might help design a space-efficient building for a new urban farm. Kate Hanford, production manager at Growing Power, said, "We thrive off that program," since the urban farm gets a large influx of volunteers every Saturday from service learners.⁷

Environmental organizations in Milwaukee

Milwaukee has many environmental organizations, as well as several networks that connect them together. The Milwaukee Environmental Consortium consists of 16 organizations including the Midwest Renewable Energy Association and the Bicycle Federation of Wisconsin, but most environmental organizations in Milwaukee are not involved with that network. A separate, though

6 "The Volunteer Center of Milwaukee/ Make a Difference Week 6." *88Nine Radio Milwaukee*. 2011. Radio Milwaukee. 16 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.radiomilwaukee.org/initiatives/make-difference/volunteer-center-milwaukee-make-difference-week-6>>

7 Hanford, Kate. Personal interview. 9 Nov. 2011.

informal network exists between Growing Power, Sweet Water Organics, and the Urban Ecology Center. Growing Power and Sweet Water Organics are both urban farms that use aquaponic systems to raise fish and plants in the same water, and Growing Power and the Urban Ecology Center both have a strong focus on teaching. Transition Milwaukee is looking to start a more formal network, since many members of the organization are involved in organizations like the Victory Garden Initiative and Architecture for Humanity. Most environmental organizations in Milwaukee learn from one another through shared membership rather than formal liaisons or networks. Many opportunities for connection and joint effort between organizations are lost due to the absence of a solid umbrella organization or formal liaisons.

The strong climate of volunteerism in Milwaukee makes it a breeding ground for many nonprofit organizations. Because of the culture that fosters growth of nonprofits, as well as the successes of key organizations, the environmentalism movement in Milwaukee is quickly growing and gaining momentum. Milwaukee organizations such as the nationally-known urban farm Growing Power and the neighborhood-centric Urban Ecology Center serve as role models to younger organizations like Transition Milwaukee, and promoting collaboration and partnerships between these organizations could greatly increase the power of environmental activism in the city and beyond.

Case Study: Growing Power

History of Growing Power

Growing Power is an urban farm based in Milwaukee that grew out of a need for healthy, accessible food in a low-income neighborhood. Their vision is “inspiring communities to build sustainable food systems that are equitable and ecologically sound, creating a just world, one food-secure community at a time.”⁸ Growing Power's first Community Food Center, established in 1999, serves as their national headquarters and training facility, but they now have several other farms around Milwaukee and Chicago. The main farm is home to six traditional greenhouses and 13 greenhouses called hoopouses that contain a mix of plants, hydroponics systems, poultry, a worm depository, and an apiary. It also has a large composting operation that uses raw materials from local farms and businesses, as well as a retail store where produce, compost, and worms are sold.⁹

In the past few years, Growing Power has gained fame rapidly. Will Allen, the man who started

8 *Growing Power, Inc.* 2010. Growing Power. 6 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.growingpower.org>>

9 “Our Community Food Center.” *Growing Power, Inc.* <<http://www.growingpower.org/headquarters.htm>>

the original Community Food Center and who continues to lead the organization, tells an intriguing story that has helped the news of Growing Power spread. As a young adult he left his family farm to play basketball professionally, then surprised himself by returning to farming years later, driven by a strong vision of building resilient communities by producing local food. His story is even more powerful because he is a successful African-American man creating jobs for Milwaukee citizens in a city where 53% of black men were jobless in 2009.¹⁰ He partnered with the City of Milwaukee in April 2011 to set a plan to create 150 jobs for low-income city residents, using the extra help to create 130 more hoopouses. Will Allen was chosen as one of the “Time 100: The World's Most Influential People” by TIME magazine in 2010 and was selected for a MacArthur “genius grant” in 2008. In February of 2010, First Lady Michelle Obama invited Allen to the White House to speak to the nation to help further Obama's campaign against childhood obesity¹¹, and in October of 2011 Obama came to visit Growing Power in Chicago.¹² This national recognition continues to draw people to Milwaukee for tours and workshops at the Growing Power headquarters.

The workshops held at Growing Power range from two to three days and take place each year in January through June. The two-day workshops focus on “Growing Your Community Food System 'From the Ground Up'” and are taken separately, while a series of five three-day seminars focuses on Commercial Urban Agriculture. In addition to these workshops and seminars, Growing Power regularly hosts a variety of visitors from around the globe. These workshops, seminars, and visits expose hundreds people from all different backgrounds to the sustainable farming techniques Growing Power uses, as well as the educational programs they offer.

Growing Power also engages young people from low-income backgrounds in its Youth Corps, a program that fosters physical activity and healthy eating. Several former members of the Youth Corps now hold internships or jobs at Growing Power, coordinating tours, washing vegetables, tending to animals, or running the store. Marvin Washington, now in his first year of high school, started working part time at Growing Power after being in the Youth Corps for three years. Thanks to Growing Power, Washington's high school has an aquaponics system and a greenhouse class, which he's planning to

10 “150 New Green Jobs in Milwaukee with Growing Power.” *Growing Power, Inc.*

<<http://www.growingpower.org/blog/archives/770>>

11 “Will Allen to Receive the NEA Foundation Award for Outstanding Service to Public Education.” *Growing Power, Inc.* <<http://www.growingpower.org/blog/archives/905>>

12 “First Lady, Michelle Obama, visits Iron Street!” *Growing Power, Inc.* <<http://www.growingpower.org/blog/archives/tag/first-lady>>

take. Of his experience at Growing Power, Washington said, “Almost every time I come, I see something different,” whether it's the addition of solar panels or innovations to the aquaponics system. Washington hopes to go to college out of Wisconsin with the help of scholarships that Will Allen sponsors.¹³ Washington is just one example of how Growing Power engages local youth and provides opportunities that they wouldn't have otherwise.

Washington lives in the Silver Spring neighborhood that surrounds Growing Power, as does Director Karen Parker and several other employees. Asked to describe it, Washington said, “It's not the best neighborhood, but it's a nice neighborhood.” In Washington's view, most people in the neighborhood have been to the Community Food Center, and “they keep coming back because it's organic and fresh.”¹⁴ Many people buy Growing Power's market baskets, which provide enough produce to feed a family of four for a week, but most people come in to buy a bag of greens or a few tomatoes. The small storefront with a brightly-colored sign adjacent to the road is usually packed with people buying produce, signing up for tours, volunteering, or asking questions, and the presence of this community center is a boon to the neighborhood.

Future directions for Growing Power

Growing Power plans to extend its product line into even more communities. Allen recently formed a partnership with WalMart, which has agreed to donate \$1 million to support local food systems and to sell Growing Power products in its stores. In Hanford's words, Growing Power is “shifting from cute, homey, grassroots farm to FDA-approved, properly certified organization.”¹⁵ The certifications necessary for selling in a store like WalMart include the good agricultural process (GAP) certification, which will take several months to process. Although the idea of partnering with such a large organization as WalMart is certainly controversial among Growing Power supporters, Allen views the partnership as an opportunity to serve even more low-income communities with local, organic, sustainable food.¹⁶

Volunteerism in Growing Power

13 Washington, Marvin. Personal interview. 20 Nov. 2011.

14 Washington, Marvin. Personal interview. 20 Nov. 2011.

15 Hanford, Kate. Personal interview. 9 Nov. 2011.

16 “A note from Will on corporations and the Good Food Revolution.” *Growing Power, Inc.*
<<http://www.growingpower.org/blog/archives/788>>

Growing Power's urban farms have no need to recruit volunteers- they come in droves after reading the open invitation on the Growing Power website or learning about the farm from a friend or a news article. Between out-of-town visitors, students working on projects for school, and local residents, Growing Power draws over 3000 volunteers per year.¹⁷ Kate Hanford, director of production, said of the volunteer crew, "You see youth alongside retired people, all different races, all different economical backgrounds."¹⁸ As a volunteer, I worked a three-hour shift on several Saturdays, mixing and sifting soil using coconut husk fibers rather than peat moss to supplement the nutrients sustainably. Important tasks like planting seeds or tending to animals were left to staff members with more training, so the mixing and organizing of soil was the main task for volunteers. Most of the volunteers with whom I interacted were students at local universities completing service learning hours for an environmental studies class, but the group I met at my volunteer orientation was very diverse. Most volunteers came once or twice, and only the service-learners or people who lived in the surrounding neighborhoods came more regularly. This loss of volunteers is most likely due to the strenuous nature of farm work – even three hours of sifting soil and carrying wheelbarrows is enough to make a young, healthy person exhausted for the rest of the day. When I expressed how exhausted I was after volunteering, Hanford told me, "You should try working an eight-hour shift."¹⁹ Although volunteers feel like they are getting a sense of what Growing Power employees experience, that sense is certainly not comprehensive.

17 Hanford, Kate. Personal interview. 9 Nov. 2011.

18 Hanford, Kate. Personal interview. 9 Nov. 2011.

19 Hanford, Kate. Personal interview. 9 Nov. 2011



Will Allen (front, center) works with a diverse group of volunteers at Growing Power.²⁰

Growing Power's Strengths

Growing Power's main strength lies in the sense of community. The common goal of using sustainable farming to make a difference in the community drives each employee's sense of commitment – as Hanford said, “When you're there, it's your life.”²¹ The organization's community is deeply rooted in the Silver Spring neighborhood, where many of the employees live. Employees often become close friends or even live together, and I heard all sorts of interesting stories at social gatherings from my friends who worked there. For example, when male goats were no longer needed at the farm, employees could take them home, along with whatever produce did not get sold, and have a feast. I was invited to several of these goat roasts, and the conversations and laughter I shared with farmers from Milwaukee, New York, and Laos was amazing.

Another strength of Growing Power is its ability to inspire others to build community food systems. In Milwaukee, it has served as a role model to Sweetwater Organics and several other newly formed community groups that are trying to create aquaponic urban farms. Its workshops and seminars spread hands-on knowledge to people from around the globe, internships draw young adults to the farm for a longer term, and volunteer opportunities encourage Milwaukee residents to take part in growing their own food. The installment of farms and greenhouses at schools around

²⁰ Palmer, Julia. “Growing Solutions.” WSU Master Gardener Program of Thurston County. 2 April 2012.
<<http://wsungtc.wordpress.com/2011/12/02/growing-solutions/>>

²¹ Hanford, Kate. Personal interview. 9 Nov. 2011.

Milwaukee as well as the Youth Corps program are making it more accessible for young people to learn about healthy, local food. Growing Power's shirts and sweatshirts bear the message "The good food movement is now a revolution," and working to inspire the leaders of the future is an essential part of that message.

Areas of improvement for Growing Power

One of the main organizational issues for Growing Power is staff burnout. Hanford recounted a time when she spent several minutes explaining something to the Hmong farmers from Laos she manages and the Hmong farmers nodded and smiled during her explanation. However, when she asked the farmer who spoke the best English whether the rest of the group understood, she shook her head no. This difficulty of communicating with a diverse group of people, as well as working long hours on a farm and dealing with the "organized chaos" that Hanford describes causes staff members to stay at Growing Power for only two to five years after getting hired. According to Hanford, "Once you pass the five-year mark, you're there for life."²² Many interns leave after their three months are up, but the ones that are hired on after that period make a commitment to a new lifestyle. Work-life balance is difficult to achieve when you come home from work exhausted each day, get most of your food from Growing Power leftovers, and live and socialize mainly with your coworkers.

Another issue that Growing Power will have to deal with is their dependence on their founder and CEO Will Allen, who plans to retire in a few years. As Hanford said, "He's very much in control, but it steers us in the right direction."²³ Allen's story makes up a large portion of Growing Power's identity, and marketing based on Allen's story may not be effective after Allen retires. It is possible that Growing Power will need to innovate more in order to maintain the same recognition that they have enjoyed for years, since currently Growing Power's support relies on fame rather than continued innovation.

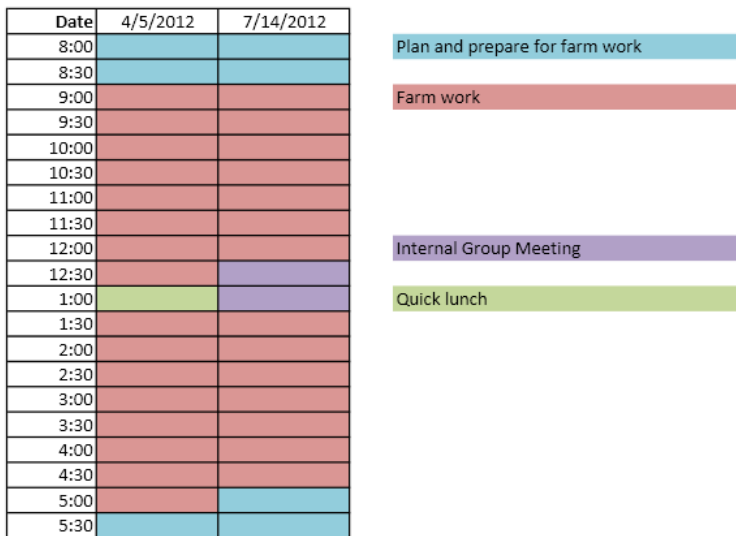
Suggestions for Growing Power

One way that Growing Power could decrease the rate of staff burnout is to delegate responsibility and encourage teamwork to support overworked employees. Hanford, who oversees 15 farms and manages several production staff members, said, "If roles were delegated out, and we were

²² Hanford, Kate. Personal interview. 9 Nov. 2011.

²³ Hanford, Kate. Personal interview. 9 Nov. 2011.

a bit more structured and organized, it wouldn't feel so crazy.” Growing Power is gaining projects faster than it's gaining staff members, to the point where Allen often says, “Even my staff don't know half of what we do.”²⁴ Inserting a longer lunch break in the middle of each day where employees would gather in groups of four or five to discuss Growing Power news, make suggestions for improvement, and take a break from strenuous farm work would reduce employee burnout over time. This change is demonstrated in the graphic below.



A longer lunch break could be used to bring employees up to date on issues and solutions, as well as give employees a chance to connect with other employees with whom they don't work directly. This image compares a typical work day and a work day with added emphasis on communication.

One issue that may come up when Allen retires in the next few years is a decline in fame. This will reduce the steady influx of visitors and volunteers that Growing Power currently sees, and Growing Power may need to work harder to recruit and retain volunteers. One way to retain more of their volunteers would be to offer other work than physical labor. Many interested and willing volunteers are not able to withstand the physical rigor of the job but might be able to help with graphic design, public relations, secretarial work, managerial and communication tasks, or farm technology. Another way to retain volunteers would be to affirm the usefulness of the work the volunteers are doing and make them feel like they are part of the sense of community that keeps Growing Power strong. One successful model of retaining volunteers is used at the Urban Ecology Center in Milwaukee, which thanks volunteers each time they visit and invites them to an annual volunteer celebration. Growing Power could use this model to build a base of volunteers who feel a

²⁴ Hanford, Kate. Personal interview. 9 Nov. 2011.

strong connection to the organization and an obligation to return on a regular basis.

Case Study: Transition Milwaukee

History of Transition Milwaukee

Transition Milwaukee is a local chapter of the global Transition movement, which aims to facilitate a shift from a high-power, high-consumption lifestyle toward an inevitably low-power future by building resilient communities.²⁵ In 2011, Transition Milwaukee became the 93rd official Transition Town as recognized by Transition U.S., though the group had been active for two years prior to official recognition. What started as a collection of interested individuals has grown into a steering committee that helps organize the efforts of the few hundred members of Transition Milwaukee, who receive regular email updates on topics related to Transition and the work of people in their community. Each month, the steering committee schedules “hub meetings,” in which they hold an open discussion on a relevant topic and help connect interested people to projects that are underway.

One of Transition Milwaukee's major events is Power Down Week. The event started with a couple of Power Down Saturdays, and the week-long version has taken place for two years. It is scheduled during the cooler part of summer so that heating and cooling are not necessary. People are encouraged to take a “staycation” and devote as much time to this week as possible, leading or attending permaculture workshops, setting goals to eat more locally or not use unnecessary energy, and discussing in community what it means to “power down.” The house I was living in used no lights for the entire week, and Kate Hanford hosted a composting workshop in our backyard. The week culminated with Energy Independence Day on the Fourth of July, which involved city residents enjoying the summer day in a local park and browsing the tables for organizations like Transition Milwaukee, a solar group called Milwaukee Shines, and the local, organic, vegan Riverwest Coop. Although Transition Milwaukee helps with many events as members suggest them, Power Down week is the main event that is specifically led by the group.

Transition Milwaukee is currently going through an organizational shift. As Treasurer Natalie Berland said, “The vision is that we're a hub for information. We would like to be an organization where people tap into our members. The reality is that we partner with different organizations for

25 “What is Transition?” *Transition Los Angeles*. 2012. Transition Los Angeles. 10 Apr. 2012.
<http://www.transitionla.org/What_Is_Transition.htm>

different events.”²⁶ The Transition Milwaukee mailing list provides members with all sorts of information about local events relating to permaculture and local communities, but the group would like to move towards a more action-oriented role in the community. The description of their gatherings as “hub meetings” conveys what Transition Milwaukee would like to become – a hub for local environmentalism, consisting of neighborhood groups that come together based on location and work groups that work on projects around a central theme. Jessica Cohodes, an active member of the steering committee, said of the committee, “Ideally, we will have created tools and resources for these groups to form.”²⁷ There are currently 6 neighborhood groups and 26 work groups, and Transition Milwaukee has already added some resources for neighborhood groups to the website, including readings on awareness raising, meeting organization, and projects. As the steering committee adds resources for work groups and communicates to new members how to start these groups, it will move towards the hub model it seeks.



RESKILLING workgroup

32 members

Latest Activity: Feb 25

A workgroup focused on reskilling citizens in the Greater Milwaukee area for greater self-reliance & sustainability.



Farm Cooperative Initiative

8 members

Latest Activity: Feb 25

Create "Food Security" by securing land or working with farmers/others to collaborate in working toward bringing land, labor, resources and best ag...



EDUCATION workgroup

8 members

Latest Activity: Feb 25

A workgroup focused on fostering educational programs that promote reskilling and sustainability in the Greater Milwaukee area.



Power Down Week

25 members

Latest Activity: Mar 28

A work group for those who want to be part of, help plan or just keep close tabs on getting ready for Power Down Week 2011

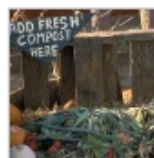


ENERGY workgroup

10 members

Latest Activity: Mar 12

A workgroup focused on fostering conservation and local energy production in the Greater Milwaukee area.

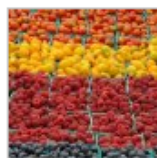


Compost Collective

18 members

Latest Activity: Feb 25

I created this group because it looks like we are starting to gain a lot traction for this project. I think we need to start brainstorming ideas as a...



FOOD workgroup

13 members

Latest Activity: Feb 25

A workgroup focused on fostering a resilient local food system in the Greater Milwaukee "foodshed."



CITY HENS workgroup

20 members

Latest Activity: Mar 14

A workgroup focused on legalizing backyard hens for egg production in the Greater Milwaukee area. (Some members prefer to communicate via a Google...

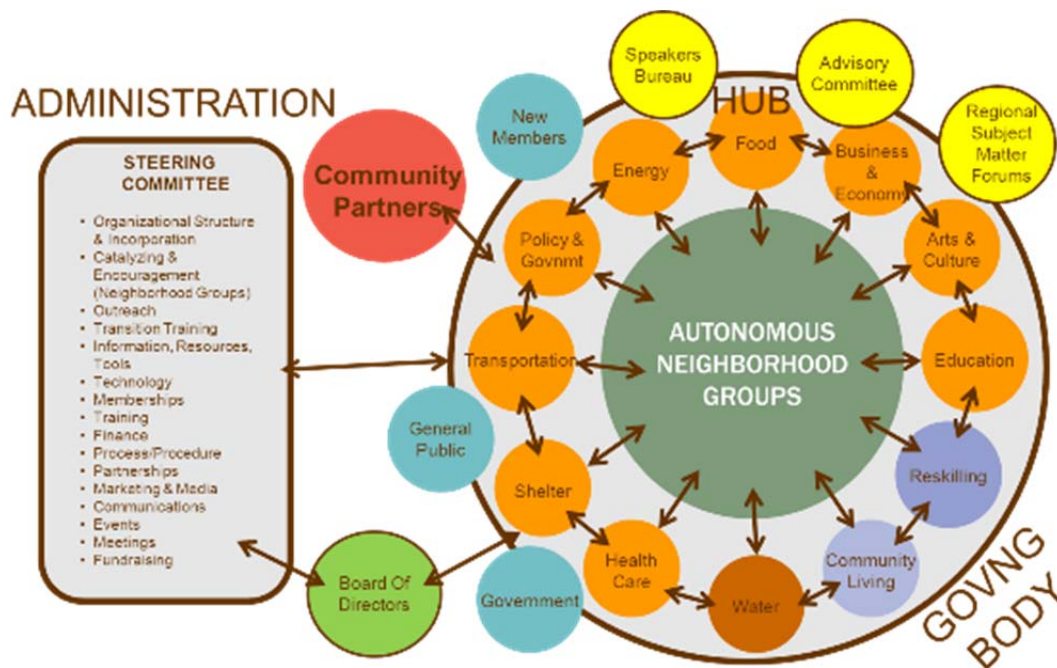
These are some of the most active work groups on the Transition Milwaukee website.

26 Berland, Natalie. Personal interview. 23 Sept. 2011.

27 Cohodes, Jessica. Personal interview. 8 Nov. 2011.

Future directions for Transition Milwaukee

The organization is moving towards being a hub for neighborhood groups, working groups, and partner organizations. The number of neighborhood groups and work groups is increasing quickly, and new groups can look to the examples of other groups in order to form. The steering committee hopes to create more resources for these groups to form and recruit members so that they can gain power more quickly. The partner organizations have not yet connected with Transition Milwaukee on a formalized level, though many members of the group are active members of other groups. The idea of partner organizations as part of the hub is just starting to take hold, with a few initial partners including the architecture department of a local university and the Victory Garden Initiative. In addition, the steering committee has set guidelines for how people can create Transition Milwaukee-sponsored projects, for which Transition Milwaukee would help advertise and recruit volunteers. The leaders hope that this structure will more clearly define how Transition Milwaukee can support projects led by its members and other Milwaukee organizations.



This is the proposed structure that Transition Milwaukee is working to establish.²⁸

Volunteerism in Transition Milwaukee

The Transition Milwaukee website was my first impression of environmentalism in Milwaukee.

28 Cohodes, Jessica. "Training Materials." 2012. Transition Milwaukee. 2 April 2012.
<<http://transitionmilwaukee.org/page/training-materials>>

Seeing all the events and working groups made me very excited to get involved, but when I finally arrived in Milwaukee in June 2011 and tried to connect with Transition Milwaukee, it was a disjointed experience. Within my first couple weeks living there, I volunteered to sit at a Transition Milwaukee table at a sustainability fair in Port Washington, about one hour north of Milwaukee. I heard about the volunteer opportunity via the Transition Milwaukee mailing list, and they were so desperately in need of volunteers that they accepted my offer even though I had no experience with the organization. The sustainability fair hosted lots of local farmers showcasing their food, as well as other groups involved in environmental activism. Explaining Transition Milwaukee to people at the event was fun and interesting, but perhaps not the best way to engage a first-time volunteer.

Toward the end of June, I heard about Power Down week and decided to attend as many workshops as I could. The fact that I was working 40 hours that week made it difficult to participate fully, and I felt that I wasn't knowledgeable enough about permaculture to host any workshops. Although I enjoyed Power Down week, I couldn't find a good way to funnel my energy and free time into volunteer work. At the Energy Independence Day celebration that marked the end of Power Down week, I volunteered at the Transition Milwaukee table: informing people about Transition Milwaukee, collecting money for bicycle-blended smoothies, and encouraging people to ride the bicycles that were powering the microphones and speakers on the stage. I noticed that the local residents who were intrigued by the ideas Transition Milwaukee represented were all new to the neighborhood, and words like permaculture and peak oil made most people's eyes glaze over because of a lack of clarity. The experience made me realize that Transition Milwaukee will need to work hard to convey its message more broadly if it wants to grow and diversify its membership.

I attended hub meetings monthly for the next several months, but I was still unable to find any volunteer opportunities. There is no formal way for someone to jump in and lead a project, and as a volunteer-run organization Transition Milwaukee has no volunteer coordinator. It wasn't until I was at a potluck with Natalie Berland, who was exasperated because she felt like she could not delegate any of her responsibilities, that I told her I wanted to help with whatever she needed most. As I found out, Transition Milwaukee had been unable to find the time or expertise to organize the data from their website and mailing list into something more useful. I jumped on the project and spent about five hours over the course of a few weeks merging the personal information from all their sources, organizing people by neighborhood to facilitate the formation of neighborhood groups, finding out which related organizations people had connections with, comparing the number of people on the

website versus the number of people on the mailing list, and compiling a list of people who were on the website but had yet to be added to the mailing list as they had requested. Using computer programming, I was able to do in a reasonable time frame what would have taken much longer to do by hand. The steering committee can now interpret the information I was able to organize and use that data to engage more people. Since this volunteer opportunity was rewarding for both me and Transition Milwaukee, it would have been better if the organization had a better way to match new volunteers to opportunities as soon as the volunteers express interest.

Strengths in Transition Milwaukee

One of the main strengths of Transition Milwaukee is the passion of its steering committee. These volunteers devote many hours each week to run the organization because they are so committed to keeping it alive. This passion feeds the passions of new members at the hub meetings and gets them excited for the work Transition Milwaukee is doing.

Another strength of Transition Milwaukee is that the organization is very action-oriented. Seldom do people have a discussion without doing something about it. The structure of Transition Milwaukee helps keep it action-oriented, with subgroups that meet frequently and report back to the general group at hub meetings once a month. The discussions on the Transition Milwaukee email list often give people details on events they may want to attend. Although many discussions take place under the umbrella of Transition Milwaukee, a number of direct actions come out of those discussions and further the mission of the group.

Areas of improvement for Transition Milwaukee

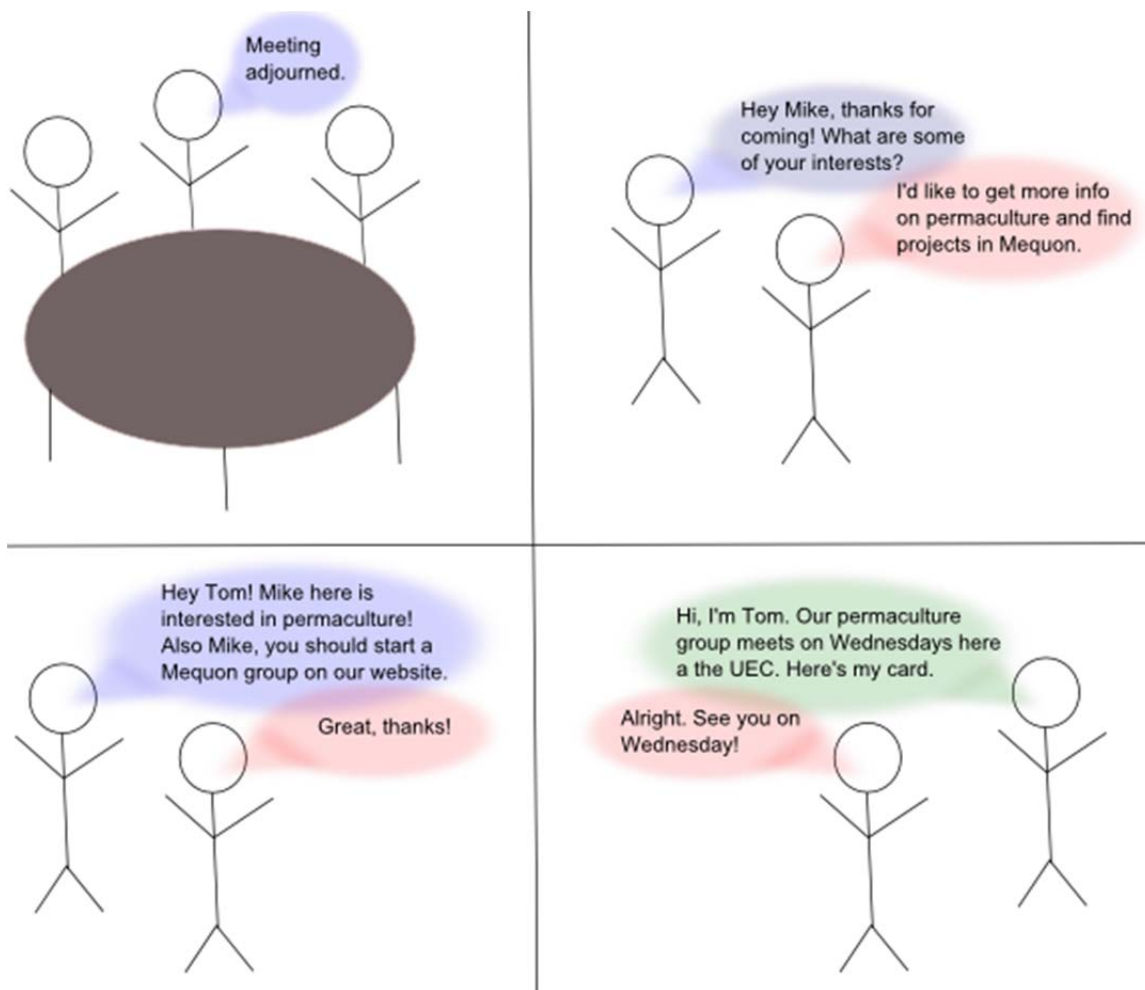
Transition Milwaukee is going through a restructuring – the steering committee recognizes that changes are needed and is trying to keep its strengths (passion and action-orientation) while improving the flow of information and becoming more than the sum of its parts. The discontinuous flow of information partially stems from the blending of different electronic resources. The yahoo email group and the website are fundamentally different ways of interacting with the people in the organization, and it is too time-consuming for members to consistently check both. Better integration of technology, such as the movement of all mailing list content to the website, could streamline communication, and this is an area that Transition Milwaukee wants to improve but has not yet figured out.

Although Transition Milwaukee's leaders are full of passion about the vision and mission that they came up with for the organization, the organization will not thrive when its founders move on if the founders cannot persuade others to become equally involved. The level of commitment from the steering committee members is daunting for new members, but unless the committee can recruit new people and delegate tasks effectively, they won't get new members to commit to help run the organization. This delegation could start with improving initial engagement of new members. My disjointed experience was certainly not unique- I noticed many new members coming to hub meetings but not getting involved in any significant way despite the fact that they had sufficient interest and time. Unless the initial excitement of a new member is funneled into a project that fulfills what they are looking for in their involvement, that new member will become just another person on the mailing list who reads the emails but never actually makes anything happen.

Suggestions for Transition Milwaukee

In order to allow new volunteers to participate more fully, I suggest that Transition Milwaukee promote the use of the working group and neighborhood group forums on the website as a way to get new volunteers involved in their areas of interest. Since there is no volunteer coordinator and no one will step up to do that job on a volunteer basis, the entire steering committee can spread out that responsibility by prompting new volunteers to communicate directly with the leader of an interest group via the website. This would be more effective than the current method of steering committee members referring new members to other people on the steering committee, who are not directly in charge of the groups that take action.

Another way to engage new members is to facilitate networking at the end of hub meetings. New members may attend an introductory meeting before the hub meeting and meet other new members, but in order to fully engage new members there needs to be a time at the end of the meeting specifically devoted to networking. Directly after each hub meeting, members of the steering committee should reach out to new members in person, ask them what they are interested in, and provide the contact information of the members who lead work groups based on those areas. This in-person engagement could strengthen the volunteer-coordinating purpose of the website by giving new members a sense of personal connection that helps fuel their future involvement.



Steering committee members could help match new members to their areas of interest in conversations after meetings.

As Transition Milwaukee goes through a restructuring, it may be useful for them to contact other Transition USA groups that have assumed a neighborhood group structure like Transition Los Angeles. Since larger cities like Los Angeles are more spread out than Milwaukee, the Transition group must have created some way for neighborhood groups to communicate and collaborate. Since the groups will likely be geographically removed, members could use Skype to network remotely either at a steering committee meeting or a hub meeting. This interaction between city groups could be a lasting partnership in which different Transition Town groups communicate their solutions to dealing with organizational problems.

Based on the results of the data organization I performed, Transition Milwaukee could also catalyze the formation of new neighborhood and working groups. When new members sign up on the website, they include their zip code and interests, which could be given to leaders of current neighborhood and working groups or given to a new member who would like to lead a group. Since

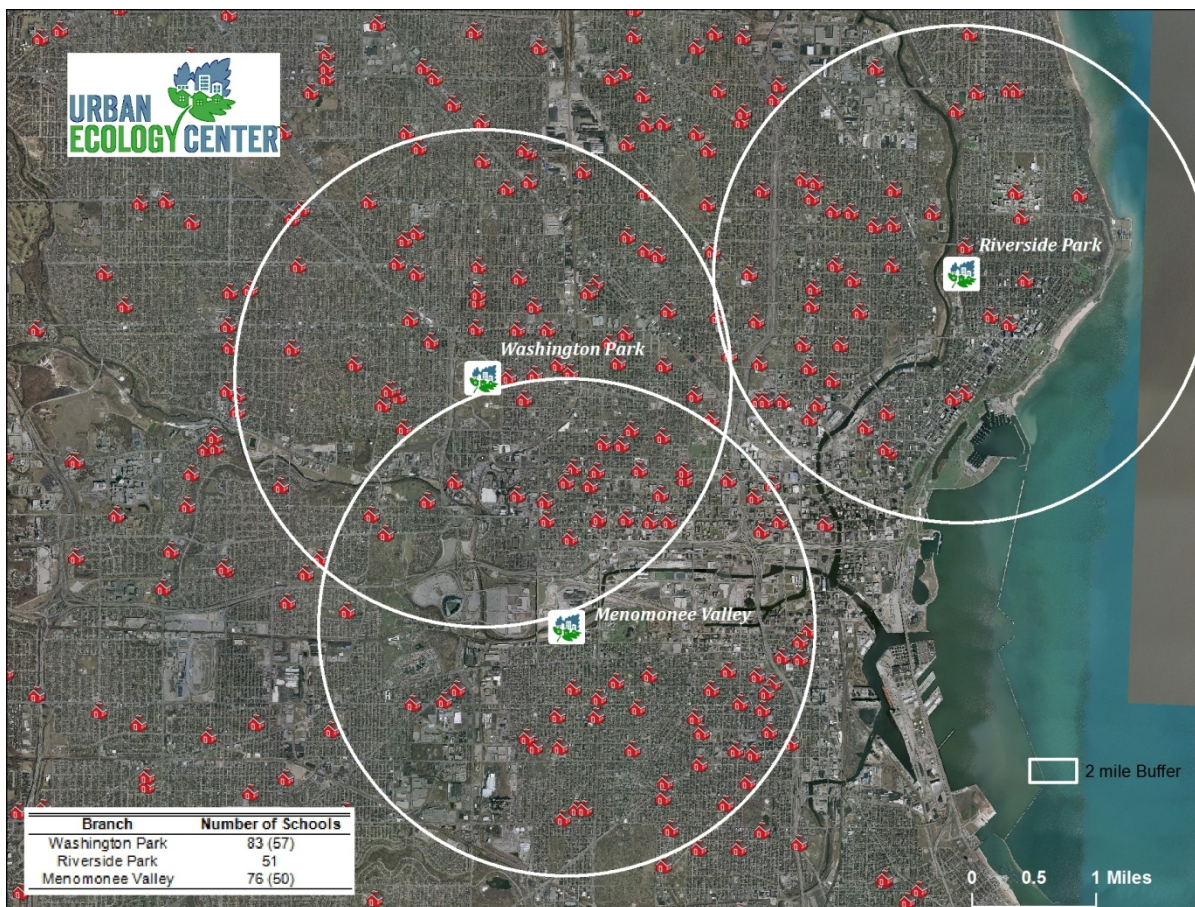
this process would involve a significant amount of work and may not have a high rate of success if used to engage people retroactively, one might suggest noting zip codes and interests and forwarding their contact information to relevant parties upon the new members' first interaction with Transition Milwaukee. However, this is impossible to do without a devoted volunteer coordinator and the enhanced networking and website approach would probably work better.

Case Study: Urban Ecology Center

History and Mission of the Urban Ecology Center

The Urban Ecology Center was born out of a need for safer parks in Milwaukee. Riverside Park, once an attractive and popular park in the early 1900s, became polluted and crime-ridden from years of industrial use of the Milwaukee River. Teachers at the high school that lies adjacent to Riverside Park began a grassroots effort in 1991 to use the park as a tool for educating young people.²⁹ The Urban Ecology Center started as a trailer with one classroom, and since then it has grown into a large, custom-made, environmentally-friendly building at Riverside Park as well as a 5-year-old branch in Washington Park and a branch in Menomonee Valley opening in fall 2012.

29 "About Us." *Urban Ecology Center*. 2012. Urban Ecology Center. 14 Feb. 2012.
<<http://www.urbanecologycenter.org/more.html>>



The Urban Ecology Center has three branches that together can serve 158 Milwaukee schools.³⁰

The Urban Ecology Center's mission is to “foster ecological understanding as inspiration for change, neighborhood by neighborhood.” This involves “providing outdoor science education for urban youth,” preserving local parks, offering resources to support the community, and modeling environmentally responsible practices.³¹ The most impactful way that they carry out this mission is engaging children in public schools. According to Erick Anderson, community program manager at the Washington Park branch, the Riverside Park and Washington Park branches together work with 43 schools, who each pay \$4000 per year to have 24 field trips at the Urban Ecology Center.³² Each branch reaches out to schools within a 2-mile radius, and when the new Menomonee Valley branch is fully functional even more Milwaukee schools will be served. These field trips, which may involve canoeing, observing and drawing animals in the park, playing interactive learning games, or getting a

30 Image courtesy of Susan Winans, Volunteer Coordinator at the Urban Ecology Center.

31 “Urban Ecology Center Mission.” *Urban Ecology Center*. 2012. Urban Ecology Center. 16 Feb. 2012. <http://www.urbanecologycenter.org/mission_statement.html>

32 Anderson, Erick. Personal interview. 10 Nov. 2011.

chance to hold animals like snakes and lizards, aim to get students interested in ecology and engaged with the natural world around them.

The Urban Ecology Center's other programs can be divided into weekly events and special events, where weekly events appeal mostly to people with specific interests and special events draw a larger crowd with more diverse interests. Some of their weekly programs include birdwatching, uprooting invasive species in the park, collecting data about local animals like bats and snakes, making recycled paper, rock climbing, and participating in the Young Scientists club. Special events include a festival for each season, lectures and discussions on environmental topics, documentary showings, summer camps, and more. People who pay a small annual membership fee can attend most programs for free and can rent outdoor equipment like canoes, paddles, snowshoes, and cross-country skis. The center offers a wide variety of affordable programs in order to promote environmentalism and science in local communities.

Future directions for the Urban Ecology Center

One of the main short-term focuses of the Urban Ecology Center is establishing their new branch in Menomonee Valley. Now that the Washington Park branch has been open for five years, the Center has some experience with opening a branch in a new community. An old tavern building will be refurbished to create a new environmentally-friendly building for the new branch. The structure of the organization will change, with the Center appointing three people as branch managers and detaching the headquarters from the Riverside Park branch.

The Urban Ecology Center also received a grant to revitalize the Milwaukee River area by turning it into the Milwaukee Rotary Centennial Arboretum. Tree-planting has begun, and the end product will be a 40-acre stretch of 1000 trees along the river, which runs along Riverside Park.

The Urban Ecology Center is even looking to partner with other organizations on a national scale. As Anderson expressed, "Sometimes I worry that our goals are higher than what we can achieve," but Executive Director Ken Leinbach is pushing the Urban Ecology Center to make a larger impact geographically.³³ None of these steps toward collaboration are displayed yet on the organization's website, but Leinbach is working on establishing connections to other organizations with the objective of making changes in education standards and related policy.

³³ Anderson, Erick. Personal interview. 10 Nov. 2011.

Volunteerism in the Urban Ecology Center

Volunteering at the Urban Ecology Center requires an orientation and a background check. The process is structured such that volunteers commit before they do any volunteer work. The center has a devoted volunteer coordinator who holds volunteer orientations and matches people's specific interests and skills to programs. By the time volunteers have gone through the orientation and background check, it is quite likely they will find something that interests them because the center has a wide variety of programs and roles, and the volunteer coordinator helps match people to a program. This process keeps a new volunteer committed and makes it likely that she will return.

Once volunteers have passed the initial hurdles of a training session and a background check, the positive attitudes and genuine gratitude from Urban Ecology Center employees makes them stay. Tim Vargo, manager of research and citizen science, said, "The people and their talents make the UEC what it is."³⁴ When volunteers step out of their comfort zones by volunteering to lead an activity or work one-on-one with a rambunctious child, they are affirmed by the staff around them. This affirmation encourages both staff members and volunteers to take risks, which ultimately makes the Urban Ecology Center an innovative place. As Vargo said, "It's one big experiment."³⁵ Volunteers are likely to stay if they are pushed to be creative leaders, rather than doing menial tasks. Volunteer recognition makes for a strong, committed volunteer force that the Urban Ecology Center can depend on.

As a volunteer with the Young Scientists program at the Washington Park branch, I got a chance to express and act upon my love for teaching. Because many Urban Ecology Center staff members are long-term volunteers through programs like Americorps or CapCorps, the gap between staff members and volunteers is virtually nonexistent. Outgoing volunteers can take leadership roles and fully engage with the students, which made my volunteer role very fulfilling. Every time I said goodbye, staff members expressed their thanks and inquired whether I would be returning the next week. This social pressure as well as the great fun I had volunteering made me prioritize this commitment and leave work early each week to come volunteer.

Strengths in the Urban Ecology Center

34 Vargo, Tim. Personal interview. 30 Nov. 2011.

35 Vargo, Tim. Personal interview. 30 Nov. 2011.

One of the main strengths of the Urban Ecology Center is the variety of programs within a narrow focus. Each branch of the Center focuses on a relatively small geographic area, which helps them not spread themselves out too thin. The Center focuses on educating people about ecology as an inspiration for change rather than trying to implement social or political change. They employ people who have the passion and skills that are needed to effectively teach people of all ages about ecology. This narrowed focus contributes to their success, because they are able to provide a variety of programs that are still linked together by a specific common purpose.

Another main strength of the organization is their retention of staff members, volunteers, and program participants. They help make people's involvement with the Center worth their time and money by finding out what they hope to gain and helping provide that. They also give anonymous surveys to volunteers and program participants to use their feedback to make improvements, which helps visitors feel connected to the organization. As Anderson succinctly expressed, "We treat our employees well."³⁶ It boils down to empathy – the staff at the Center are caring yet practical, and these qualities make them very good at communicating with anyone they can relate to.

Areas of improvement for the Urban Ecology Center

The Urban Ecology Center could spread its message further by attracting a diverse audience. As Vargo said, "You struggle with reaching communities you're not currently reaching."³⁷ The Riverside Park branch does a great job of attracting Caucasian environmentalists of all ages and geographic origins, but those people are not a representative cross-section of the surrounding neighborhoods. They could work on getting more college students involved who may not be directly interested in environmentalism, or African-American families who may not know about the perks of membership, such as free canoe rentals. The Washington Park branch is good at retaining a few interested kids who visit the Urban Ecology Center with their school and then return to the Center multiple times a week for the Young Scientists Program. However, as Anderson said, "We want to do a better job of including adults [from the area]."³⁸ Half of the attendees at a typical lecture or film screening are Washington Park branch employees or volunteers, and the other half are from other areas of Milwaukee. Aversions to documentaries, jargon, and other cultural barriers must be overcome in order to cater to

36 Anderson, Erick. Personal interview. 10 Nov. 2011.

37 Vargo, Tim. Personal interview. 30 Nov. 2011.

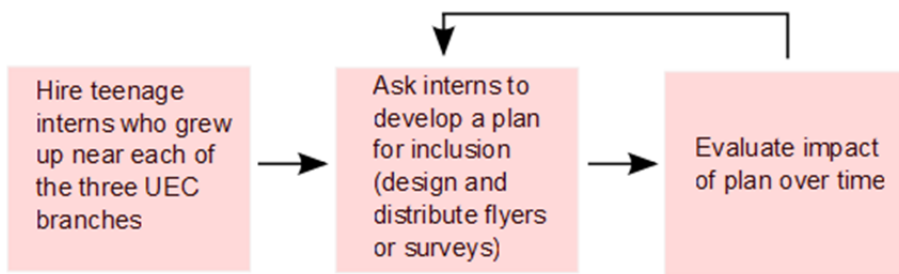
38 Anderson, Erick. Personal interview. 10 Nov. 2011.

a wider audience than just passionate environmentalists and curious children.

The Urban Ecology Center could also improve by equalizing their branches. The Riverside Park branch, which is home to a more affluent subset of Milwaukee, has a much nicer space and many more employees. Although it makes sense to have one branch serve as the headquarters of the organization, the run-down and homey Washington Park branch has a much different feel and may have a negative effect on recruitment of program participants. As Anderson expressed, revitalizing the Washington Park branch is not a financial priority for the Center, but perhaps it should be if they are looking to attract more adults.

Suggestions for the Urban Ecology Center

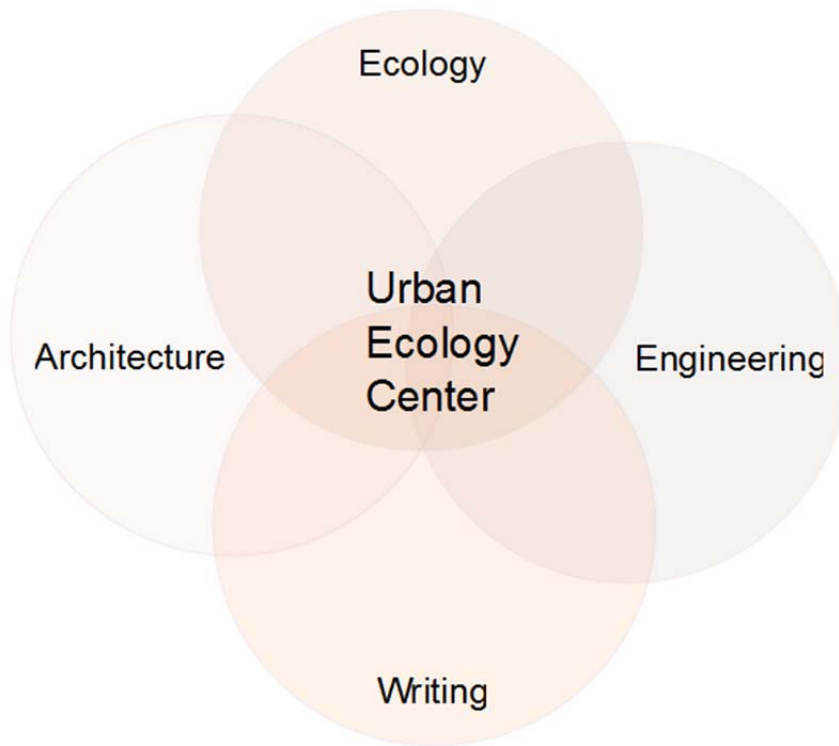
Although the Urban Ecology Center does a great job of retaining program attendees and volunteers who identify as environmentalists, they could do a better job of including a wider audience in their programs. They might do this by getting a better understanding of what different audiences look for in community programs through surveys at local schools, then creating new programs that meet those needs and advertising for them at local schools and other community centers. The center could also hire teenage interns who grew up in one of the neighborhoods close to a branch of the Urban Ecology Center and have them develop a strategy for inclusion.



Hiring interns who focus on reaching a diverse audience could help the Urban Ecology Center make a bigger impact.

The Urban Ecology Center could also try to make their teaching approach more interdisciplinary. Teaching ecology by itself may give children an appreciation of the natural world, but blending ecology with other topics they have learned in school and may want to pursue after school would foster a new generation of environmentally-minded people in all professions. Are the children interested in construction or architecture? Spark their imagination by challenging them to design an environmentally-friendly house. What about engineering? Encourage them to design products that are multi-purpose, reusable, and recyclable. Future writers or artists? Encourage them to write stories

or make drawings about their experiences in nature. Interdisciplinary education is key to connecting what children learn and study to the world they will inhabit as adults.



An interdisciplinary approach to teaching ecology would help children connect what they are learning to the real world.

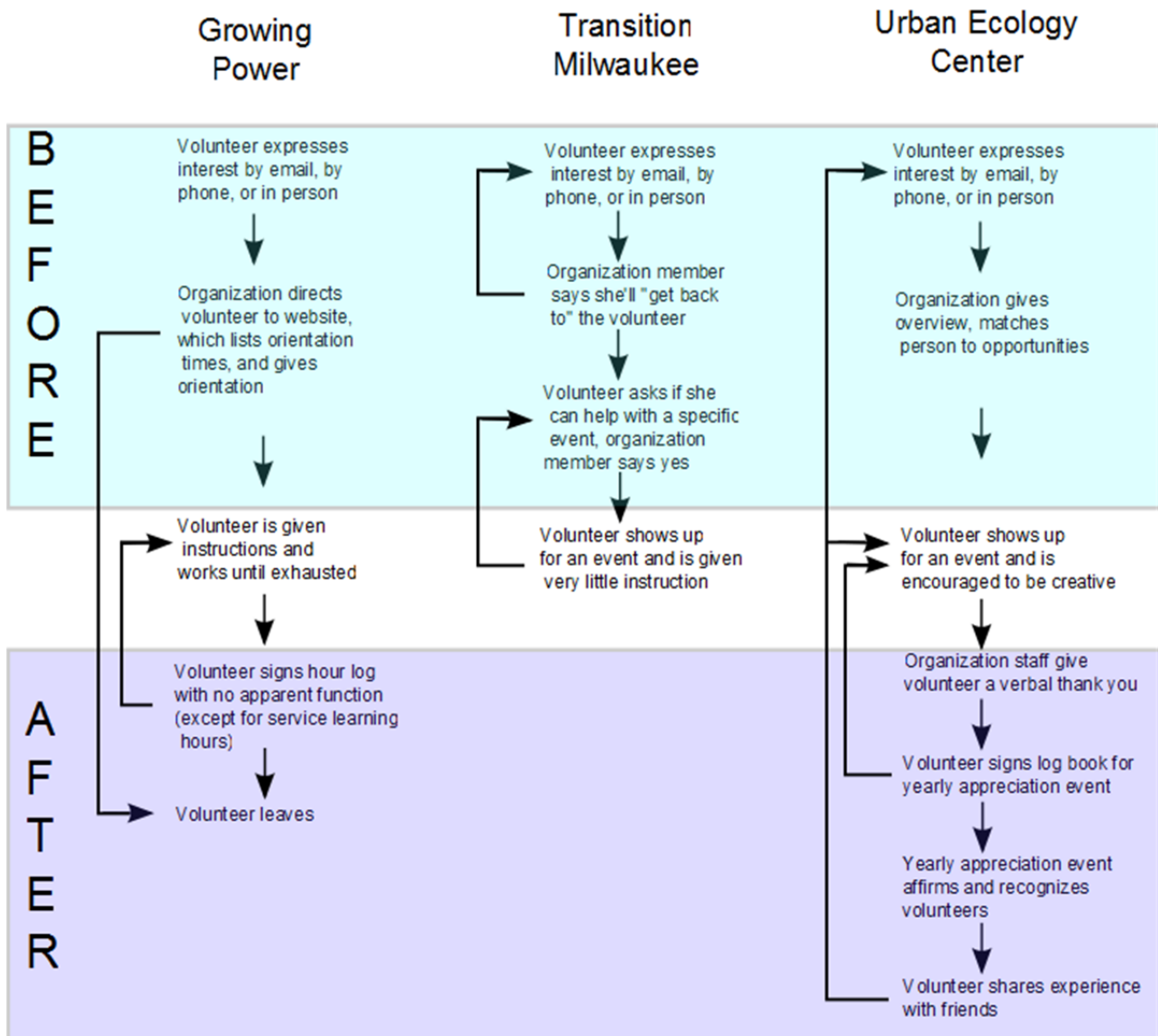
Finally, the Urban Ecology Center could put some money into revitalizing the Washington Park branch so that it better matches the custom buildings at the Riverside branch and the new Menomonee Falls branch. This money could be raised through a fundraising event at Washington Park that also aims to draw in and inform community members. Although changes to the building at Washington Park may need to be approved by the group from whom they rent the building, a new paint job and a few animal-themed decorations could make the space more inviting to visitors for a small amount of money.

The use and coordination of volunteers

All three case study organizations use service learners as volunteers. The local universities are a source of enthusiastic young people interested in different facets of environmental work. Students studying urban ecosystems do farm work at Growing Power, architecture students help Transition Milwaukee's partner organizations flesh out their ideas for a new building, and students of urban education work with children at the Urban Ecology Center. The main downfall of using service learners

as an organization's main source of volunteers is that their time with the organization is brief. They may work predictably long hours with an organization for several weeks, but unless an organization can convince the students that continuing to work with them is worth their time, their volunteer availability will be unpredictable in the long term. Since several universities in Milwaukee promote service learning, the periods over which the volunteer work must be done do vary, but ultimately there will be surges and shortages of volunteers due to heavy dependence on service learners.

Each of the three organizations has a different approach to handling volunteers, with varying levels of retention. Growing Power attracts many different volunteers, but the ones who keep coming back are friends of current employees. The urban farm is not very successful at retaining new volunteers because the volunteer program is run haphazardly by whomever is available when they arrive. New volunteers don't get the sense of community that makes Growing Power employees feel connected unless they already know people who work there. Transition Milwaukee has no volunteer program in place, so even the most outgoing people have trouble finding volunteer assignments. If a volunteer starts a new project, they probably will not get the affirmation they need to stay motivated and keep doing work for Transition Milwaukee. The Urban Ecology Center's volunteer program has a high barrier to entry, with a mandatory orientation and background check, but once you have gone through that process it is a lot easier to find opportunities to volunteer in your area of interest. From the first time you show up to help out, you are greeted with appreciation by all the employees, and you can't help but return. Once a year, the center holds a volunteer appreciation dinner where employees serve volunteers a delicious meal and the CEO gives a speech thanking all the volunteers. The Urban Ecology center does a great job of expressing gratitude for volunteers, which helps them have a high volunteer retention rate. Although Growing Power and Transition Milwaukee have a hard time recruiting volunteers who aren't already involved indirectly, the Urban Ecology Center has developed a strategy that works well for retaining volunteers, and Growing Power and Transition Milwaukee should aim to adopt a similar strategy to strengthen their volunteer force.

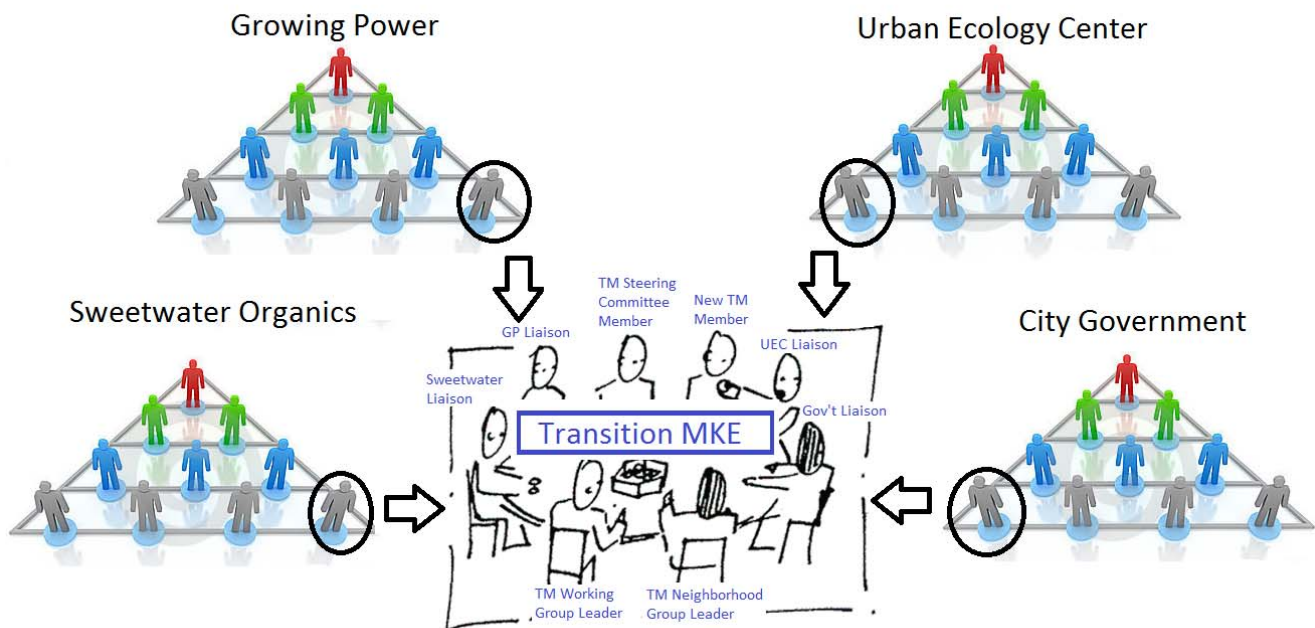


Comparison of new volunteer experiences before, during, and after an event for three key environmental organizations in Milwaukee.

Strengthening the Movement

The environmental organizations in Milwaukee could form a much more cohesive, effective movement through formal collaboration. These three case-study organizations could start working together by using Transition Milwaukee as the hub it strives to be. Transition Milwaukee could grow and mature from connecting other Milwaukee environmental groups together, while Growing Power and the Urban Ecology Center, as well as other smaller organizations in the area, could become an active part of the Transition Milwaukee network via formal liaisons and mutual advertising. The larger

organizations could take advantage of Transition Milwaukee's large membership pool to recruit volunteers and event participants, and Transition Milwaukee could grow by taking a leadership role in the environmental movement.



*Monthly Transition Milwaukee hub meetings ideally would include formal liaisons from non-profits, businesses, and governmental groups as well as steering committee, working group, and neighborhood group leaders and new members.*³⁹

These three environmental organizations, as well as the many others in Milwaukee, are making a difference locally. But how can their successes and failures lead to change on a nation-wide or global level? Growing Power has expanded from Milwaukee into the larger city of Chicago, but its volatile organizational structure may prevent it from successfully expanding further. Transition Milwaukee has been a significant part of Milwaukee environmentalism for the two years it has been in existence, but it will need to interact more with the greater Transition movement to create real change. The Urban Ecology Center has gotten Milwaukee kids excited about ecology, but their mission of inspiring change could be much more effective if they collaborated with organizations directing policy or school curricula. Each of these three organizations has room to grow, and their missions and visions are highly compatible. By working more collaboratively, Milwaukee environmental organizations could form a more cohesive environmental movement with ties to organizations in other cities, states, and nations.

³⁹ Graphics courtesy of dreamstime.com and dcpug.wordpress.com.