Social Work and the Challenges of the Green Economy

Social workers know that people need to be understood within the broad, complex context of their environment. This person-in-environment perspective encompasses the broad diverse aspects of social work practice and distinguishes it from other helping professions. However, especially in the United States, the term too often fails to consider the natural and physical environment. This is particularly unfortunate in the face of ongoing environmental and climatic shifts that disproportionately threaten the most vulnerable populations around the globe and in the wealthiest nations. This is a matter of global concern that requires local solutions. It is directly relevant to social work practice. Unfortunately, as noted by Michael Zapf (2009), social workers “have been strangely silent” about issues related to the natural, physical environment and the related “serious threats to human well-being and continued existence” (p. 18).

The wealthiest populations tend to be the greatest consumers and producers of the products and related activities damaging to the global environment, yet the impoverished are most likely to suffer the consequences. For instance, the United States is the world’s top emitter of carbon dioxide, but the cost of climate change is disproportionately borne by those least able to afford the costs or recover from the effects. As noted in *Global Climate Risk Index 2011* in relation to recent extreme weather events: “all of the ten most affected countries (1990-2009) were developing countries in the low-income or lower-middle income country group” (Harmerling, 2010, p. 5). Indeed, as a result of climate change, tens of millions of Bangladeshis could be displaced by rising sea levels over the coming decades, and that nation’s agriculture is already suffering from salinization as rising sea levels contaminate the nation’s delta regions (Chopra, 2009). Throughout the developing world, social workers tend to focus on social development and issues of sustainability directly related to environmental issues including population, food supplies, and disasters connected to natural devastation. Social work in the United States is largely silent on these issues. It is my hope that this paper might offer insights about work related to and aimed at addressing that lack.

This paper examines my community-organizing efforts in a small, urban, northern plains community in the United States. Those efforts seek local solutions of benefit to the immediate community that also address global issues of climate change. Ultimately, despite numerous successes including U.S. federal stimulus funds, those efforts yielded only mixed results including some great disappointments. This paper is written in the spirit that mistakes and failed attempts often offer the most valuable lessons.

I currently live and work in an area dominated by flat, flood-prone plains in a basin affected by the arctic waters of the Hudson Bay, and with cold winds that sweep across the plains from the Canadian Rockies to a valley with little deciduous foliage to capture solar heat. Arctic high pressure systems produce frigid temperatures from October through March with lows dipping below 0 °F 50 days per year. We have notoriously cold winters and residents burn a lot of fossil fuels to keep their homes warm.

Aware of the increasing financial costs for local citizens and the related global damage, in the spring of 2007, the city’s Mayor signed on to a program with the somewhat ironic title of *Cool Cities*. Since 2005, the Sierra Club's *Cool Cities’* initiative facilitated collaborations “to implement clean energy solutions that save money, create jobs, and help curb global warming” (Sierra Club, 2011). Within a few years over one thousand cities and counties had joined the commitment to reduce their community's carbon footprint.

Our Mayor’s decision sparked a process to design local solutions that promised the possibility of savings for individuals, jobs for the local economy, and even a way to distinguish the community, while addressing this issue of global concern. The Mayor’s move was consistent with recommendations published in *The United States Conference of Mayors’ Energy and Environment Best Practices* guide that described “America’s vulnerability to an uncertain energy future,” a policy environment that was “not sustainable” and thinly veiled references to national leadership that was either denying global warming or simply not acting on these broadly recognized concerns. The document noted “fortunately . . . Mayors from across America are taking the lead” (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2007). One of the first steps in our town was to organize, and over the following months citizen volunteers helped create a broad set of recommendations.

Some of the members included the produce manager at the local food co-op who also happened to be one of the State’s leading activists on behalf of energy and environmental issues. I then recruited a Professor from the University’s Earth System Science and Policy department. The effort was also joined by “a key author” of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report on climate change. His work had been part of the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize awarded jointly to former Vice President Al Gore and the IPCC for raising global awareness about the human impacts on the environment and climate. In a press release, he expressed the hope “that my grandchildren will not blame my generation for our stupidity of spending nature's capital while leaving the payments to them (UND, 2007).” The volunteers eventually included some five dozen professors, local activists, along with various other community members and city officials (Bonzer, 2008). The work began with great optimism.

The group began meeting during the fall of 2007 at a time when I had class, so I was not able to participate in person until the end of the semester. I had moved to the community just a couple years earlier. As a fairly new member of the community I enjoyed its small town, democratic possibilities, and even its quirky combination of a welcoming attitude and resistance to innovation and change. When I was finally able to begin attending meetings in early December I was more than a little intimidated about joining a group that was likely already beginning to coalesce, especially in light of the many prestigious and knowledgeable members. I was concerned that, as a social worker, I would have little to add to the conversations of scientists and experienced activists.

Nonetheless, I had become convinced of the relevance and crucial importance of what Joanna Macy (1998) refers to as the ‘Great Turning:’

if there is to be a livable world for those who come after us, it will be because we have

managed to make the transition from the Industrial Growth Society to a Life-sustaining

Society. When people of the future look back at this historical moment, they will see,

perhaps more clearly than we can now, how revolutionary it is (page 17).

I felt that social workers had a moral obligation to involve themselves in such work, and that we are even uniquely positioned to take leadership roles. At the same time, I was troubled by a broadly shared view that the profession had not yet found an essential role, and that our skills were not being recognized or engaged (Macy, 1998; Orr, 1994; Zapf, 2009).

As I began attending meetings, I was quickly reminded that social workers bring necessary perspectives and make meaningful contributions to group process. The larger group had been meeting for about three month before I was able to come to my first meeting, yet I was surprised at how little had been accomplished. Beyond an enthusiastic report read by a student intern who had been assigned to the committee, and a round of introductions (it seemed that they should have already known one another by that point) not much else was accomplished at my first meeting.

The next meeting that I attended was for the policy sub-committee, which included a veteran City Councilman and a senior aid to the mayor. Again, I was rather stunned at how little had been accomplished by these intelligent and well-connected individuals. The main decision made at that meeting was that we would individually review a long list of programs and ideas from other cities around the region, and then return with recommendations. The list included ideas like changing to more energy efficient lighting, coordination of the city’s stoplights for more efficient traffic flows, and directives to get city employees to reduce their use of paper. There were some ideas that were fairly new to me like rain gardens and white roofs, but for the most part, in addition to being rather unimaginative, it was rather shocking that these efforts had not already been implemented.

Four months into the effort, and the group still seemed to be at the ‘brainstorming stage.’ Over the next few weeks the president of the local chapter of the Sierra Club sent around a link about the Cambridge Energy Alliance that was just forming in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The basic principles of the CEA were not particularly revolutionary, but they promised an effort sufficiently simple in its concept to be taken on by a community organizer with only limited training in environmental issues and limited technical and engineering knowledge. The idea also seemed to offer fantastic reductions in carbon output.

The basic principle of an energy alliance is to make greater use of existing technologies to reduce residential energy use. While manufacturing and SUVs are often the targets of those interested in addressing issues of global climate change, in many communities the greatest consumption of energy takes place in individual homes. In addition to constantly running refrigerators and ‘energy vampires’ (computers, DVD players, etc), in our town one of the single greatest uses of energy through much of the year is used to keep people warm while at home. Almost all of these forms of energy consumption could be done more efficiently, and the work to accomplish that generally required only simple technologies with quickly recouped costs.

More specifically, energy alliances provide a ‘one stop shop’ resource for homeowners by connecting them to energy audits, trained contractors, and financing. Energy auditors begin by employing various technologies to identify inefficiencies. The energy audits they produce identify the ‘low-hanging fruit:’ the least efficient components of their overall energy system that could be corrected for the least expense. Trained contractors then enter the picture by confirming, correcting, and adding to that information and by providing either specific bids for completing necessary work, or advice for do-it-yourself enthusiasts who may want to take on part or all of the work themselves. The combined information from the auditor and the contractor results in various options for making the home more efficient and estimates for projected savings. Energy savings average close to 30% and the savings pay for the costs in as little as two to seven years, after which time the homeowner continues to enjoy savings that increase as energy prices rise. The final step of an energy alliance is to help make financing arrangements so that the cost can be spread over an appropriate time period with the result that homeowners incur no actual out-of-pocket expense. The energy alliance model connects available technologies and resources with no ‘cost’ to homeowners while simultaneously reducing carbon emissions. I thought an energy alliance was consistent with social work perspectives and might benefit from the efforts of a community organizer.

At the next meeting of the whole group, I made a brief presentation suggesting that the city consider creating a program similar to the Cambridge Energy Alliance. The idea was well received, and the committee thought it should be included in the overall report to the mayor. Furthermore, the committee encouraged me to go ahead and pursue development independent of the larger, Cool Cities initiative. It was further suggested that I consider working in conjunction with the city (Housing Authority & Urban Development), Excel Energy (the main power supplier for the region), and local foundations. I felt like I had found a project uniquely situated to benefit from a social work perspective and a social worker’s skills.

One of my first steps was to contact Steve Morgan at the Cambridge Energy Alliance. He offered his mentorship, leads for other contacts, and invited me to get back in touch with him if the city made some sort of commitment to the idea. I also met with Grand Forks’ City Councilman who represented the ward that I lived in, was the longest-serving member of the council, and who had been the only councilman who had served on the original committee. It was during those meetings that the idea for a three-step process emerged: 1) a feasibility study to determine if an energy alliance would be a viable idea for our city; then, dependent on the outcome of the first step, 2) the design of an organizational structure and development of budgets and funding needs; and, finally 3) the actual creation and implementation of an *Energy Alliance*.

On May 16, 2008, I met with the Executive Directors of the local Housing Authority, and the Office of Urban Development. As it was an election year we decided to postpone further talks until we knew the outcomes of the June 12, municipal election. The mayor who had started the whole thing and the sole councilman who had volunteered to serve in the resulting process were both reelected. I drafted a contract proposal and on June 27 the two decided to evenly split my bid proposal of $8,000 for an estimated 150-250 hours toward the development of a Feasibility Study. At that time in my life I had already completed my PhD and had been an adjunct professor teaching U.S. and environmental history for about eight years, but that summer I was also completing work on an MSW degree. Accordingly, I checked in with my primary mentor and the chair of the social work department who advised me through this community organizing process.

By July 1, I had procured funding for a feasibility study and I had put together a team that included spouses of different colleagues at the University of North Dakota. One was a PhD anthropologist with extensive diplomatic training, and who had previously worked on international trade arrangements for his native Austria. More recently, he had just completed a five-year contract with the University of California system as a project manager—it was no overestimation to refer to him as an expert in every phase of project development and execution. Our other partner had worked as a community organizer in Chicago before going to Romania in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union to work with non-governmental organizations engaged in the process of setting up democratic institutions. Since moving back to the United States she had worked as a lobbyist on various national campaigns before taking time-off from her professional life to raise her two sons through their infancy. The spring of 2008 was the first time in several years that she was looking to reengage her career outside of the home. The city was fortunate to have such talented individuals working on their behalf, and with their extensive experience we were immediately imagining ways that we might export the model internationally. We began our work on July 2.

The Feasibility Study team initiated a series of meetings with local contractors, banks, and energy providers, as well as research into energy audit systems, rates of return on various efficiency steps, and other related issues. While the explicit purpose was to determine if an energy alliance was technically, financially, and logistically viable, we quickly understood that our work would need to include public education and even efforts akin to a political campaign. To that end we took advantage of a series of crises that paralleled our work.

When we began, Al Gore’s movie *An Inconvenient Truth* was dominating a lot of the political discussion in the county. The idea of an energy alliance offered a politically ‘soft’ approach to concerns about global warming in that everyone could do their part to help reduce carbon emissions. ‘Soft’ because it included aspects that could appeal to the array of ideologies dominating the political landscape at that time. For those who accepted the idea of climate change, this was not a difficult sell. For those who did not believe the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, we shifted the conversation to being good stewards of the land and the inherent foolishness of wasting resources unnecessarily. No one, regardless of their political inclinations, tends to favor burning resources with no benefit.

The next crisis to dominate the headlines and to capture the attention of the American public came as we approached the heating season. Prices began to escalate, and by the middle of that summer the nation was paying an average of $4.12 per gallon for regular gas at the pump. In the face of rising fuel costs both the immediate and long-term benefits of an energy alliance were even more attractive. More efficient homes would immediately result in lower energy bills, and savings would continue to increase if energy prices continued to rise. Furthermore, our proposal could now be explained to conservatives as a mechanism for reducing domestic dependence on foreign oil. Clearly, our small effort had not created this global rise in the price of oil, but we were able to take advantage of it in terms of our local, ‘political’ campaign aimed at building support for the idea of an energy alliance.

As if global climate change and record high oil prices were not enough, 2008 threw yet another crisis at the world in the form of the mortgage crisis in the United States with its ripple effects on the global banking industry and national economies. Once again, we were able to point out the value of an energy alliance idea with its promise of creating jobs. There were approximately ten thousand homes in our city, and most had been built during or previous to the 1970s; indeed, the housing stock near the city’s core was over a century old and had not been adequately rehabbed in relation to energy efficiency. Some had received a new layer of insulation during the 1970s, but since that time, materials, techniques, and our collective understanding about energy efficiency had all improved. Various experts that we spoke with compared a three-decade-old layer of disheveled insulation in the attic to putting a moth eaten sweater on top of someone’s head—it offered a little help in keeping the head warm, but the rest of the body did not receive much benefit.

In addition to meeting with auditors, contractors, and bankers the team met with two different organizations that had already been doing work similar to what we were proposing, the local community action program and a private business. They each helped us to understand our work more clearly and to better define a more specific focus for the energy alliance.

The area Community Action ran a weatherization program. Making use of federal funding, they had been retrofitting an average of about 100 homes per year in their four-county area. Their program was similar to an energy alliance in that they began with an audit employing the latest technologies including a blower door and an infrared camera. The blower door is draped across an open, outside door and has a large fan that blows air out of the building. The resulting negative pressure emphasizes any cracks or other weaknesses that might exist around closed windows or doors, and even voids where the insulation might have slumped over the years. The infrared camera adds to this by allowing a quick scan of all areas to ‘see’ where those problems exist. For instance, when he performed an audit was completed of my home it detected the regular culprits: improperly sealed electrical outlets, cracks around windows and doors, problems in and around the foundation. It also revealed a four-square-foot space in an outside wall where the insulation had apparently slumped between the studs and the inner and outer walls. The space was near the ceiling and there was no visible evidence that there was a problem. We had not previously understood why that part of the home was always so chilly. The audit found similar problems including a similar area in the kitchen ceiling near an outside wall—a place where we were always cold, but unable to explain why. Without the combination of the blower door and infrared camera it is unlikely we would have ever found those weaknesses in our energy infrastructure.

The Community Action’s program was different from what we were proposing. Theirs only served those who fell below certain income guidelines—and offered the homeowner little choice. Indeed, spending limits dictated the work they could complete (capped at $3,500 per home--that limit was raised in 2009). Generally speaking, they always spent the full amount whether or not that would provide the best return on investment, but most often, they were not able to spend the necessary amount to address the unique problems of each house. Additionally, they were only able to complete work on just a few dozen homes in our city while estimates indicated that there were easily thousands of homes that could benefit.

The team also met with a businessman who had leveraged his sheet metal business into a business that had been contracting with local government to perform audits and upgrades for public buildings. His organization had already enjoyed favorable local press for work on some of the larger city and county buildings. We had originally imagined serving commercial, public, and residential buildings, but we learned that doing this work with big, non-residential buildings was distinct. First, because the scale of the project was so much larger accountability and guarantees were an essential component. This tended to be easier (at least in theory), in buildings where regular maintenance and even controls on usage were more likely to be controlled and monitored. In contrast, residential customers have a tendency to adjust thermostat settings on a whim and to even act ‘irrationally’ by doing things like turning up the heat while opening windows for sleep comfort. Additionally, the mechanical systems for large buildings were far more complex than houses, even if the house included a few thousand square feet of living area. Most importantly, we were not interested in duplicating services or creating unnecessary competition.

The city was already being served by a business addressing large government and commercial buildings, and the community action weatherization program was serving a modest number of low-income home owners; neither was set up to serve the thousands of middle-income homeowners. Based on their experiences the Community Action people and the local businessman were supportive of our work and convinced this was a good idea for the city. They saw an energy alliance as an essential service that could reduce the city’s carbon output, stem the flow of local dollars to an energy company headquartered in another state, and produce numerous jobs in our local economy.

The idea of an energy alliance seemed viable for our city. While we already had auditors, contractors, and banks operating in our community, none of those players could pursue this work unilaterally. It all appeared so remarkably simple, but without an energy alliance to coordinate the process it was rarely taking place. Energy audits had been available for years—often for free or at reduced costs—but the few people who took the time to have their homes audited rarely took the next steps: indeed, there was no clear guidance about what those steps might be. Contractors had always been available to do the work, but without the audit and the intervention of an objective third party, many homeowners were unsure about who to hire or about what work to have done. For instance, homeowners could contact a window installer or someone in the business of putting insulation in their attics—and generally speaking the contractor was more than happy to sell windows or more insulation—but it was unclear what should be done, in what order, and in what amounts to assure the most favorable ratio of investment to savings (Should all windows be replaced? Should there be one foot or three feet of extra insulation?). Without the audit, coordination, and objectivity of an energy alliance, the homeowner had little sense of what repairs made the most sense from a financial perspective. Finally, without the authority of an energy alliance, financing was rarely available for such endeavors and homeowners were left to invest with little sense of likely returns. Various tax incentives helped to encourage related work, but it was generally performed in an ad hoc fashion that served the economic interests of contractors and suppliers rather than a specific, intentional effort to reduce carbon emissions or to maximize investments for consumers. The market-driven system was not serving any of the individual parties.

In a similar fashion, the energy alliance model promised to move beyond the tired paradigms of government versus private sector, or Keynesian versus Supply Side economic theories. The government sponsored weatherization programs being performed by community action imposed irrational limits, while the private sector pursued only the most profitable ventures (large buildings) rather than residential buildings. There was no incentive for either to serve the large number of homes that actually offered the greatest community-wide need, opportunity for reducing carbon outputs, and the possibility of creating jobs while keeping money in the community.

As the team pursued the technical aspects of the feasibility study in relation to energy usage, we became increasingly aware that an energy alliance offered a new model for serving a broad array of community needs—a hybrid of government, private, and non-profit sectors. We imagined a service with inherent social value that neither fit traditional market dynamics nor conventional ‘government programs.’ Even the non-profit approach was not quite right, since there was no need to be endlessly chasing grants to support staff, when all that was needed was a facilitator to coordinate the auditors, contractors, banks, and homeowners. While an energy alliance could benefit from facilitation by the three sectors, too much involvement from any single one would be antithetical to the needs and potential of an energy alliance. We were looking for something more along the lines of Muhammad Yunus’ social enterprise model, but with a less formal organizational structure. We imagined serving low- and middle-income residents in a way that supported both rather than creating an adversarial relationship: a way to *preserve the commons*, which in this case meant everything from the local economy to planet-wide ecosystems. We imagined a way to not just improve the local housing stock, but a transformation of how a community feeds itself, cares for and educates its children, and takes care of its elderly—things that we all share in common regardless of race, class, gender, or the national borders that further confine us. We felt we were helping to create a model for doing community work that could be shared with people all around the globe. At every step we encountered only enthusiastic support: from conservative bankers and independent contractors, from visionary energy auditors imagining new ways of energizing our lives in the most efficient fashion possible, and especially from homeowners seeking lower energy bills and greater comfort during the long winter.

We had soon completed a preliminary report with its clear indication for a necessary ‘awareness-raising’ process—part marketing and part political campaign—to gain support for the idea and to create a sufficient customer base. Our Interim Report was distributed to all stakeholders including the city. One of the mayor’s assistants expressed his appreciation for the interim report, noting that it gave him something concrete to take with him to a meeting in Washington, DC to report on the progress of the city’s Cool Cities program. However, it was during that period that we began worrying that the city would eventually develop something *like* an energy alliance, but that they would only fix-up a dozen homes, publicize the whole effort as a great success, and never realize more than a tiny portion of what we were proposing.

As we continued our work on the feasibility study we continued to have numerous meetings with community groups and government officials. We presented a GANT chart to the mayor’s staff demonstrating a carefully coordinated and detailed schedule to secure seed funds and begin pilot projects to test the practical logistics of our theory, and to screen and hire staff. Between the three members of the feasibility study team, we had clearly gone well over our original obligation of 150-250 hours; indeed, we had likely spent close to that much time just in the numerous meetings we had with the mayor’s office. Around the middle of October we presented our freshly completed Feasibility Study to the County Commissioners and won their support.

The next stage of our work took the most time, was the most frustrating, and yielded the fewest gains. A long series of meetings—some involving multiple stakeholders, others limited to direct talks with the mayor’s staff—resulted in little more than confusion. Through the long winter and spring we tried to explain our vision to individuals beaten down by the vicissitudes of the electoral process. The mayor’s staff was caught in the paradoxical position of having to provide leadership and service without risking political vulnerability. We felt that we were simply asking for permission to write grants on behalf of the city to enter the next phase of the work—the implementation of pilot programs and the initiation of marketing and education, but we found ourselves on a treadmill chasing promises. At one point we were even the center piece of a ‘dog and pony’ show for a U.S. Congressman where the city wanted to demonstrate the innovative things it was doing to promote a green economy. The Representative’s chief of staff was the brother of the Executive Director of the local community action program. The presentation went well, and our connection was rewarded with a high level endorsement from the Congressman’s office recommending that the city support our efforts.

But the frustrations continued. In follow-up to a meeting with the Mayor’s chief-of-staff I wrote a letter trying to answer his three questions about the Energy Alliance (EA): “What do you [the Feasibility Study team] want from us [the city]?” “We still are not quite sure what the EA will do or [what it] is about,” and “What will the EA get for the city?” It appeared that the auditors, contractors, bankers, and homeowners all understood, but the one party upon which our future plans pivoted seemed unclear about what we were trying to do.

In retrospect, the first two lessons to be taken from the whole experience might be 1) to keep the message simple and clear, and 2) to not become overly dependent on a single course of action. In our meetings with the other parties, it was easy to keep the message simple as we were able to focus on just the portion pertaining to each individual group: Auditors quickly understood what their role would be; contractors were hungry for work; bankers wanted to make loans; homeowners wanted warmer homes and lower energy bills. But in the process of explaining to the city how that would all fit together, especially in light of our (perhaps overly grand) vision, the description became more complex. We were speaking to overworked staff members and we often had the feeling that no one had actually read the feasibility study.

We failed to understand the second lesson—the need to avoid dependence on a single course of action—because of two different factors. The first factor involved the reality that connecting ourselves to the city seemed to be the most promising path to secure start-up funds, either directly from the city itself, from other levels of government, or from foundation grants. Part of the work of the feasibility study was to investigate the possibility of funding, and we had concluded that these multiple possibilities held great promise for seed money (our proposed budget for completing the next two stages ranged from a minimum of $144,300 to an optimal level of funding at $241, 700). We did not want to start a new government program or add an additional layer to the existing bureaucracy, but a partnership with the city seemed like the best way to facilitate the start-up of the EA: after all, it was the mayor’s office that had initiated the work by signing on to the Cool Cities initiative. Our other reason was that none of us were looking for jobs. We felt that we lacked the necessary expertise to run the program—though we considered ourselves to be the best positioned to get it started—and all of us were simply between different projects at the time. The feasibility study was quite clear in describing that screening and hiring the proper staff was an important part of the next phases, but it is unclear if the city saw this as a lack of faith on our part, or if we were simply holding out for more money. At any rate, by tying our next moves to an endorsement or permission from the city we ended up hamstringing the effort: the city was reluctant or unwilling to make any further commitment at that time. Nonetheless, they kept bringing us in for additional meetings and continued to talk about the EA as though they both supported it and were involved in shepherding its development.

As problematic as our relationship with the city had become, it was not entirely unsuccessful. The next essential ingredient in developing the EA fell into place over the spring and summer with roots in earlier events. Exactly a week after the completion of the Feasibility Study, Barack Obama won his bid for the White House. While President Bush’s administration had created some funding for energy efficiency programs, the greatest promise of support for ideas like the EA came when President Obama signed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) on February 17, 2009. The Act included additional monies for weatherizing modest and low income housing, but that was more directly relevant to the work of the local community action. The parts of the ARRA of greater significance to the development of the GFEA included $3.2 billion for Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grants (EECBG), and $3.1 billion to help states invest in energy efficiency.

The mayor’s office applied for and received several hundred thousand dollars in EECBG funding. On May 26, 2009 the City Council voted to support development of an Energy Alliance by allocating “$175,000 in this alliance and putting it in Urban Development Office,” (Minutes, May 26, 2009, 2.16) The County Commission had only received $64,000 in EECBG funding, but they opted to put all of that amount toward the GFEA. Between the two branches of government, the EA now had $239,000 to engage the next two development phases, well over the minimal amount the Feasibility Study team had budgeted months earlier and only $2,700 short of what we had described as an ‘optimal’ funding level. Indeed, the optimal amount had included funds to support grant writing, meaning the EA now had more money than had been projected as necessary to carry out the next development steps. The next phase was to include sorting out the various legal issues, developing an accounting process, and creating the necessary boards—we had already received commitments for an overall Board of Directors, as well as separate advisory boards for construction and for financing. The original budget had also included nearly $30,000 for equipment, over $50,000 for marketing, and sufficient funding to pay for the audits, assessments, and training to complete twenty-four pilot cases. Furthermore, our proposed a plan promised to finish all that work in advance of the 2009 heating season.

I contacted Steve Morgan at the Cambridge Energy Alliance to share the good news. His work had been successfully proceeding, and they were ready to go into full operation later that month. He offered to meet with me (and the committee) for a follow-up, hour-long phone meeting after we got a little further along, help with each of the points in our feasibility study and the details of our next phase, and an offer to be part of any future presentations we might make to the city. Part of our feasibility study had included the need to find mentoring organizations, and part of the Cambridge Energy Alliance’s mission was to mentor fledgling energy alliances.

At that moment of excitement and victory, the effort slowly began unraveling, though that was not at all clear at first. With their vote, the City Council had handed the effort off to the Office of Urban Development, which seemed fine: Urban Development had been one of our original two sponsors and the Executive Director had been an ongoing supporter of the idea and a frequent attendee at meetings. Besides, we had never obligated ourselves to more than the completion of the feasibility study, and the three members of the study team were ready to engage on the next steps of our lives. That spring I had accepted a tenure track position with the Social Work department at the local University. My one partner had signed a contract to teach classes in China for the university’s Business Department, and the other decided to go back to school to earn a graduate degree in social entrepreneurship through the Department of Public Administration. For their part, Urban Development explained that they had posted a job announcement and would begin screening for a director to lead the new Energy Alliance.

However, the job search seemed to go on far longer than was necessary. As fall approached the city explained that the grant money, though approved, had not yet been released by the feds. Though it seemed the city could have provided short-term funding in anticipation of being repaid when the grant finally arrived—certainly, they had sufficient discretionary funds in the spring of 2008 to fund the feasibility study. In the meantime, the window of opportunity to initiate work in advance of the coming heating season had been lost.

Near the end of 2009 an individual was hired to serve as the Energy Sustainability Coordinator for the city. That person had previously worked for the University’s Energy and Environmental Research Center. During the work leading up to the Feasibility Study the Center had been contacted; and while its mission included the development of efficient energy systems, generally they seemed interested in either far more technical or ‘larger’ issues—we had not been able to establish any sort of useful collaboration. The successful applicant’s earlier work had included some film making and, at least at one time, a focus on mercury and other toxic air emissions from power plants and industrial output. However, her background does not appear to have included any sort of community organizing or specific entrepreneurial activities. Nonetheless, I trusted that the city had made a solid choice, and by the second meeting of the EA under that individual’s stewardship, it seemed that she was capable of running the operation and that my continuing role would be limited to service as a member of the advisory board.

There continued to be periodic meetings in which a dwindling number of the same individuals would arrive to rehash matters. A series of training sessions were made available to create additional auditors (though there was not yet sufficient work for those already trained—often at their own expense). Similarly, contractors were being instructed on matters related to energy efficiency. Bankers were the first to stop coming to the meetings, and I do not recall any significant presence from home owners or representatives of neighborhood organizations, though we frequently heard about long waiting lists of people wanting to make use of the EA’s services. Every few months advisory board members were asked to volunteer their time to help with some event to promote the EA. These efforts were far less than what had been imagined and described in the marketing plan of the feasibility study.

Over the next two years, approximately a dozen homes were audited and some had repairs completed. A portion of the original grant was loaned to some of those homeowners to finance the upgrades. At one particularly disappointing meeting the advisory board listened to a 45-minute PowerPoint presentation about the virtues of energy efficiency and the positive return on investment. It turned out that this was a colleague of the individual who had already been working on energy retrofits for the city’s large public buildings. The advisory board was then informed that a large portion of the EA budget was going toward work on public buildings, though the feasibility study had stressed that the EA should focus on just private residences. At that same meeting, it became clear that the advisory board was not, in fact, being asked for advice at all, and that the EA had become little more than another layer within the bureaucracy at the Office of Urban Development. I pointed out that the original trajectory for the EA had been the development of a quasi-governmental, independent agency, and that we should strive to establish a separate, non-profit entity. Although a separate, follow-up meeting was held to look into that possibility, some private health issues in the coordinator’s family meant there was little time or energy for that work.

By the end of 2011, the original funding for the EA was mostly spent. While some of that money went into loans to a handful of homeowners, much of it went to pay for a large retrofit of a public building and for two-years of salary for a single job. No meaningful process had been piloted or developed. No equipment had been purchased. No extensive public education or marketing campaign had been engaged. Rather than creating a new process to coordinate community resources addressing community needs, and developing a local model for dealing with a global crisis . . . $239,000 in stimulus funding had gone to create a sleepy bureaucratic office and a single job.

In an October 21, 2011 story by Patrick Springer, it was noted that our state had “finished last among the states in a ranking of progress in striving toward energy efficiency.” The same article noted that the state was among “the 10 states ‘most in need of improvement (Springer).’” The director of the Great Plains Institute noted about the state: “we stand out for a lack of leadership (Springer).” In sharp contrast, Massachusetts—home of the Cambridge Energy Alliance that we had first modeled our work after, and that had offered assistance and mentorship that was never embraced—emerged as the “top ranking state in energy efficiency (American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy).”

Despite my frustration with various individuals, it would be a gross error to blame the single person who was put in charge of the EA, or even to blame the Mayor’s office or the Executive Director at the Office of Urban Development. As a community organizer, it is my job to evaluate what happened, try to understand the lessons from that experience, and to look at best possible next steps.

I recently attended a conference for community land trusts, an alternative housing and community model. One of the speakers listed the following ingredients as essential to building strong communities, especially those engaging new, alternative, or non-traditional models. Such efforts require 1) compelling ideas; 2) capable leaders; 3) a base of support; 4) public education; 5) sufficient seed money or start-up capital; 6) professional services; and 7) perpetual responsibility. The early phases of the GFEA clearly had compelling ideas, the offer of professional services, and a near abundance (at least according to our budget proposals) of necessary capital. However, most of the other components were largely dependent on the second ingredient—capable leaders. We had developed a strong base of support during the first phase, but as the original leaders left the project there was a corresponding decrease in that base of support. The limited education and marketing efforts engaged by the GFEA were largely directed by technocrats, and did little to go beyond basic messages about the need for energy efficiency—there was no connection to global issues or the possibility of news ways to organize communities. Finally, instead of perpetual responsibility we had inadvertently created perpetual bureaucracy with its tendencies toward self-preservation and limited innovation.

We had begun the creation of a model deeply embedded in social work values, providing a way “to enhance human well-being” . . . “with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty (NASW, Code of Ethics).” Furthermore, it was a model to connect communities around the world. Once piloted in a small, border town it could be replicated to the north in Canada, or on the other side of the world in China or Bangladesh where increasingly industrialized economies are generating growing energy demand, and where the results of climate change are potentially most threatening: a model that embraces self-determination and understands that the person exists in their environment, including their social and their physical environment.

This paper began by chiding social workers, especially in the United States, for not paying sufficient attention to environmental issues. While we tried to do that in our work, as the sole social worker on the Feasibility Study team I neglected some of the most basic aspects of practice. I abandoned the work before it was complete, and, having established a service model, I underestimated the need for ongoing social work support, perspectives, and skills. I continue to believe that the model of an energy alliance not only holds promise for helping homeowners and creating jobs, but that it could be replicated across the country and the world, and that it could greatly reduce carbon emissions. As the saying goes, the cleanest calorie of energy on the market is the one that is not produced. Similarly, the model of coordination and collaboration operating beyond the bounds of the paradigm of government or the capitalist market offers hope for transforming other aspects of community as well, both on the local and the global level. As disappointing as the energy alliance was in relation to the original vision, it still exists: it has a lovely website, and many of our city’s buses sport large reminders that not too long ago the city was actively engaged in building its green economy. That effort has not disappeared, but it is in need of social work’s unique gifts.

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