

How Energy Can Play a Role in City-Building and Urban Revitalization

Article By:

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Recently, I came across [this article](#) about city-building. It's a powerful piece about how the "built environment" of a city integrally relates to the success of that city. The author, Carol Coletta of the Knight Foundation, freely acknowledges that while the built environment is not the end-all, be-all for a city, the built environment nonetheless plays a significant role in a city's success. Especially in attracting that desirable demographic group of 25-34 year-old professionals.

Ms. Coletta identifies the urban core as a prime example of how built environments play that significant role in a city's success. What does the city center have? It's walkable. It's bikeable. It's mixed use. It's mixed age. It's mixed building stock. But in her article, she led off the characteristics of city centers with this word: dense. City centers are dense, and that's a good thing. In fact, it's a great thing!

Density concentrates a heterogeneous set of people, which helps income diversity and sets the stage to at least slow or possibly reverse the income gap, according to Ms. Coletta. Density, by its nature, increases interaction amongst people and promotes civic engagement. Ms. Coletta uses Portland as an example of how city leaders fostered civic engagement by promoting urban areas. Portland wildly succeeded in this endeavor to create civic engagement through denser urban areas.

From an energy perspective, urban density provides significant opportunities. One of those opportunities is district energy, which I've previously written about [here](#). District energy creates a platform for municipalities to use energy more efficiently, develop an economic development engine and provide a foundation for sustainable development. As an aside, Portland tabbed district energy as a [cornerstone strategy](#) to stimulate and revitalize its urban areas.

District energy allows more efficient energy usage – by a significant margin that sometimes yields an 80 percent to 30 percent efficiency ratio. Greater energy efficiency results in less fuel used, which lowers costs. Lower emissions naturally result because the system uses less fuel to create the same energy output.

Municipalities can also use district energy as an economic development engine. By controlling energy delivery, the municipality places itself in a better position when attracting businesses because the municipality controls that energy infrastructure and can coordinate better with those businesses on

their energy needs. The municipality might also offer an economic development package that includes energy-related incentives to the courted business. Finally, creating a municipal district energy utility opens the opportunity for the municipality to keep a greater portion of those dollars spent on energy circulating in its local economy.

Next, municipalities can foster sustainability by creating a district energy utility. District energy systems are more fuel efficient, as mentioned above. Further, district energy systems maintain substantial flexibility in the types of fuel they use. Wind, solar and biomass can all be integrated into a district energy system.

District energy offers many benefits, and I've chosen to list only three direct benefits in this post. The promotion of urban areas represents another, indirect benefit of district energy. As Ms. Coletta writes, dense urban cores increasingly constitute the measuring stick for successful cities. By using district energy to promote urban areas and create greater densities, municipalities can provide even reasons for people to live in urban areas and create those opportunities for engagement that have worked so well in Portland.

In short, district energy helps promote city-building and denser urban areas that facilitate municipal goals of greater civic engagement and attracting young professionals, along with the direct energy benefits of increased sustainability, enhanced efficiency, and boosted economic development. Municipal leaders – you need to think about district energy and how to incorporate it into your city-building efforts to facilitate achievement of your municipal goals.

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