

City has new EcoDistrict

Bold plans for a greener downtown

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Rochester has formed Upstate New York's first EcoDistrict, a special designation that will help urban development leaders create a green and sustainable community downtown.

"The idea is that we create a geographical boundary that is small enough to innovate quickly but big enough to make a difference," says Michael A. Philipson, co-founder of Greentopia. The local nonprofit organization celebrates — and advocates — for sustainability.

"Having this designation puts us in a class of cities worldwide that are really at the forefront of moving their sustainability and resiliency goals to the top of the list."

The 285-acre EcoDistrict boundary includes, among other sites, the new Monroe Community College campus, the Rochester Red Wings stadium, the High Falls District, and neighborhoods adjacent to the Genesee River Gorge.

GardenAerial, a project to transform the middle gorge of the Genesee River

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MIKE BRADLEY

Lisa Baron of Greentopia looks out over the old RG&E Beebe Station along the Genesee River in Rochester. The plant is being demolished, and the site is part of a proposed EcoDistrict.

COHOUSING EXPERT TO SPEAK

Liz Walker, co-founder and executive director of EcoVillage at Ithaca, will talk Sunday in Rochester about collaborative housing, **Page 9A**



MIKE BRADLEY

The mill race at High Falls is being turned into a garden with a water feature, led by Lisa Baron, right, and Greentopia.

EcoDistrict

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into a world-class tourist attraction, lies at the heart of the EcoDistrict.

Residential and business members within that boundary will set goals — producing zero waste in five years, for example — that could potentially be replicated throughout the Greater Rochester area.

Rochester joins a small number of cities with the designation, including Boston, Washington, D.C., and Portland, Oregon, which has five EcoDistricts and was the inspiration behind Rochester's effort.

Considering the idea since fall 2012, Greentopia secured a resounding recommendation from the Finger Lakes Economic Development Council — as well as support through the Regional Economic Development Council under Gov. Andrew Cuomo's "Cleaner, Greener Communities" program — to begin the district's planning and organizational phases.

In a collaborative show of support for the EcoDistrict's ideals, seven city and county representatives are heading to Portland in mid-May for intensive tours and workshops they hope will help with the transformation.

"Obviously, the EcoDistrict is a new

concept for us, so going to this training will be very significant so we are all on the same page," says Anne Spaulding, the city's energy and sustainability manager.

She will join the group, which has expertise in planning, zoning, development and engineering, on the three-day trip. "We can learn from each other and develop that vision together."

To be clear, an EcoDistrict is about urban regeneration, not urban renewal.

"Urban renewal is about displacing, and this is about integration," says Greentopia co-founder Lewis Stess. "This is why there's a social justice aspect to the design, why we want to have community representatives from all economic levels as part of the stakeholder groups."

Widespread collaboration in an area ripe for redevelopment is key, as long as the focus includes the future, according to Lisa Baron, founding board chair of Greentopia.

"When you're trying to develop an urban area, you can't just use up your resources, your land, your water, your energy without thinking about the next 200 years... This is an area where new ideas can be tried out on a district level that will perhaps blossom into big ideas for an entire city. And maybe not."

That's the point.

An EcoDistrict is like a laboratory. If something doesn't work, there isn't as much of a financial loss, and it gives par-

ticipants a chance to refine methodologies and goals for the next idea, explains Philipson.

Christine Mondor, a principal of the sustainable architecture and consulting firm evolveEA in Pittsburgh, has worked with three EcoDistricts and numerous other communities that have adopted sustainability goals.

Mondor will be one of two guest speakers at Wednesday's breakfast.

She echoes the notion that some initiatives will face challenges, which is why it's useful to seek support from cities that have been through the process already.

"Each project is unique, which is why it's never the same process twice, but everybody has problems," she says. "It's really helpful to have (access to) communities that are pursuing similar things."

Greentopia has hired two sustainability consultants to assist with the initial phase and, ultimately, help shape a new identity for the region.

"We think Rochester can catch up to some of the more progressive cities already realizing the benefits of creating sustainable neighborhoods and communities," says Philipson. "We've joined a very elite group."