



**BUSINESS OF THE CITY COUNCIL  
CITY OF MERCER ISLAND, WA**

**AB 5403  
March 20, 2018  
Regular Business**

**STAR COMMUNITIES FRAMEWORK  
DISCUSSION**

**Action:**  
Receive presentation. No action necessary.

- Discussion Only
- Action Needed:
  - Motion
  - Ordinance
  - Resolution

<b>DEPARTMENT OF</b>	City Manager (Ross Freeman)
<b>COUNCIL LIAISON</b>	n/a
<b>EXHIBITS</b>	1. Sustainable-Mercer Island, Community Petition Letter 2. STAR Communities Framework, 2-page summary.
<b>2017-2018 CITY COUNCIL GOAL</b>	n/a
<b>APPROVED BY CITY MANAGER</b>	

<b>AMOUNT OF EXPENDITURE</b>	\$	n/a
<b>AMOUNT BUDGETED</b>	\$	n/a
<b>APPROPRIATION REQUIRED</b>	\$	n/a

**SUMMARY**

At its annual January Planning Session earlier this year, Council determined that the City should deepen its commitment to sustainability within all municipal operations and across the entire community by making it one of the 2018-2019 Council Goals. This action echoed work originally laid out in the City’s 2006 Comprehensive Plan identifying the *Triple Bottom Line* principles (i.e. Equity, Environment, Economy; or sometimes known as: People, Planet, Profit) as key filters for Council decisions and City actions.

During a follow-up discussion at its February 20, 2018 Regular Meeting, Council agreed to portions of the draft Council Goal language, but sought additional information on the STAR Communities Framework in order to determine how best to use it as a planning tool. This agenda item and presentation provides a deeper exploration of the STAR system, explores its use by other cities, and assesses the associated staff and time demands. As preparation for the March 20 presentation, staff recommend that Councilmembers watch an overview video about STAR; see: <https://vimeo.com/203178410/95ccd23a10> (40mins, followed by Q&A).

**BACKGROUND**

Early in 2017, the City began hearing from community members eager to assist with local sustainability campaigns and interested in rekindling previous successful efforts at collaborative citizen action. After a number of productive gatherings and discussions late last year, the City’s Sustainability Manager helped the group self-organize under the “Sustainable-Mercer Island” banner.

Members of the group are eager to assist the City draft and implement a City Sustainability Plan, and have strongly encouraged the use of the STAR Communities Framework as a tool to write the plan. The group also vigorously endorses incorporating sustainability as a core concept that drives decision-making across the City, and submitted a petition letter to the Council to that effect (see Exhibit 1).

The STAR Community Rating System, released in 2012, is a voluntary, menu-based certification program designed for communities to evaluate their progress against a set of 49 standardized sustainability objectives; see Exhibit 2 (two-page summary) and [www.starcommunities.org](http://www.starcommunities.org). To date, approximately 70 municipalities nationwide have chosen to become certified under the program at the 3-STAR, 4-STAR, or 5-STAR level based on the number of points they receive. In Washington State, this includes Seattle, Tacoma, and King County. Staff at King County also helped design STAR and are willing and available to provide input to Mercer Island as needed.

The STAR rating system is broken into eight Goal Areas (see the 8 columns in the Exhibit 2 Table), each with several objectives (i.e. the boxes in the Table). Each of the objectives above contains two types of evaluation measures in the STAR Community Rating System with associated points available:

- **Community-level Outcomes** are quantitative, condition-level indicators that demonstrate community progress within a STAR objective.
- **Local Actions** are taken to move toward the community-level outcomes – the range of decisions, investments, programs, plans, and codes that a local community puts in place (e.g., a complete streets policy, police non-discrimination training, or natural areas restoration). Actions focus on interventions that move the needle toward desired outcomes, and can be implemented by both the local government and other community groups and partners.

Case studies of the first 50 cities to successfully certify under STAR indicate several key trends:

- Most of the scoring is currently derived from Local Actions (i.e. City programs and services) vs. Community-level Outcomes; since Outcomes take longer to realize, STAR administrators expect this proportion to shift over time as certified communities attain higher levels of performance.
- High scoring cities tend to be tightly networked with their community and able to work easily across all departments toward shared goals.
- The direct feedback on sustainability progress inspires collaboration and City aspirations can bring new advocates and partners to the table.
- Outcomes under the Equity and Empowerment category are consistently challenging for most applicants, partly due to lack of national standards and metrics.
- Obtaining climate and GHG data (e.g. from utilities) can prove especially difficult.

## **PROPOSED ACTION PLAN**

With these trends in mind, staff envision the following course of action over the following 12-18 months:

- 1) Create a cross-department staff team to lead the STAR process, with project management shared by the Sustainability Manager and DSG Administrative Services Manager.
- 2) Train relevant staff on STAR usage, both as a policy filter and with respect to necessary data gathering.
- 3) Formally join the STAR program and interact with local practitioners; this also allows access to additional materials, and the opportunity to apply for scholarship support under the STAR Leadership Program.

- 4) Perform a trial scoring effort under the STAR rating system as a means of gap analysis – this will also reveal arenas in which the City has no data collection at all and what new measures might be needed to achieve actual certification.
- 5) Engage with *Sustainable-Mercer Island* and other local advocates to assist with data gathering, ideas sharing, public awareness, and implementation.
- 6) Use the STAR framework of 49 objectives to inform the drafting of the City's Sustainability Plan, which would also have a Climate Action Plan component.
- 7) With lessons learned from the above steps, staff would then explore using the STAR objectives as a filter, and potentially organizing framework, for other major City planning processes. This could ensure that issues such as equity, diversity, civic engagement, affordability, etc., receive due consideration when relevant. With Council approval, this filter could hold equal weight and significance as the other filters (e.g., Mercer Island Comprehensive Plan, financial impacts, staff capacity) that are currently applied to prospective City projects and programs.
- 8) Staff will also continue working with the Planning Commission as it considers recommending to the City Council goals and policies supporting the use of the STAR rating system in land use planning and decision-making at the City (Council added STAR Community to the Comp Plan docket).

The City has recently launched powerful new tools (Scope 5 software) to track various sustainability measures and progress towards GHG reductions, as discussed at the January 20, 2018 Council meeting (AB 5377). Data from Scope 5 is expected to inform part of the City's assessment under STAR, and conversely, STAR will reveal areas where we need expanded tracking that may be possible under Scope 5.

In the future, planned staff updates on general sustainability and GHG reduction progress would also provide progress reports on the City's sustainability plan and trial scoring effort under the STAR rating system.

## **STAFFING/RESOURCE NEEDS**

Most cities find that certification requires significant staff time to locate and collate all required data, run novel analyses (often using GIS) to assess their achievements under certain objectives, or implement new tracking metrics. Recent detailed conversations with staff at the cities of Seattle, Bellevue and King County deeply involved with STAR certification informed the following summary:

- When the City of Seattle pursued certification, it hired a highly skilled graduate intern to work on the project half-time for 9 months then full-time for 2 more, plus 0.1 FTE from the Deputy Director of the Office of Sustainability for 6 months and 0.4 FTE from a Policy Advisor for 4 months. This is equivalent to approximately 1,500 hours (>0.7 FTE) from the core staff team alone. In addition, some 200 other city and outside agency employees also contributed time to the effort through interviews or data gathering, the GIS department contributed several hours a week for 3 months, and a consultant gathered data for one of the Built Environment objectives. As a large city with a nationwide reputation for sustainability work, it was deemed important for Seattle to attain a 5-STAR rating (achieved in 2014) and the effort was staffed accordingly.
- Bellevue decided to first assess its baseline condition (in early 2017) and receive a preliminary STAR score before pursuing additional steps, and hired a very capable graduate intern (in her final year) to lead the process full-time for 3 months and half-time for another 4 (approximately 850 hours, or 0.4 FTE). The city's GIS department also provided staff to work full-time on required demographic analysis for 4-6 weeks, and other staff were interviewed for data as needed. After receiving its provisional score, Bellevue elected to pursue full certification and will announce that outcome officially in a few weeks. Over the coming years, Bellevue's Environmental Stewardship Manager envisions using the STAR objectives as a tool to help with the updating of the city's 5-year

sustainability plan, and hopes that other departments might be able to use some STAR metrics as a way to enhance performance tracking efforts under existing outcome-based budgeting protocols.

- King County is one of the few non-cities to achieve certification (4-STAR in 2016), and was one of the pilot communities that helped to design and improve STAR through a year-long testing and evaluation period starting in 2012. Mercer Island staff expect to benefit from this deep regional expertise and the County's willingness to assist others with the STAR process, including speaking to the Mercer Island City Council at the March 20, 2018 meeting, and a prior community presentation to *Sustainable-Mercer Island* on December 11, 2017. King County has many 'outcome level' data sets, many of which are set up to allow Mercer Island results to be selected out. Their data collections efforts included 400 hours of intern support, about 350 staff hours for data collection and formatting, and interacting with STAR on-line reporting tool. Leadership engagement included guiding submittal priorities, reacting to provisional scores and rating, reviewing findings, and reflecting on performance gaps.

To date, only four cities nationwide have achieved the top-level (i.e., 5-STAR) certification, and 26 cities or counties have achieved 4-STAR. With one exception, all are larger than Mercer Island, and only six have populations under 100,000. While it's too early to gauge exactly what the level of effort would look like for Mercer Island to achieve certification, many of the STAR data collection requirements do not scale down for smaller cities, and pursuing certification is estimated to require significant dedicated staff effort over most of a year, along with consistent volunteer and paid intern support.

As a result of the substantial staffing and resource requirements of certification, many communities choose to first use the framework, at no cost, as a robust tool for sustainability planning and gap analysis. Upon completing that step, some communities will report their preliminary scores and determine where they might land on the STAR scale. Depending on the results, some will then choose to seek formal certification (as Bellevue recently did), while others may decide to take a year or two to focus on improving underscoring categories.

At this point, staff recommends that we move forward as outlined above and determine if additional resources would be needed once the gap analysis is complete.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

*Sustainability & Communications Manager*

Receive presentation and determine to what extent the STAR framework will be incorporated in Council's 2018-2019 Goals.