

When Will Estes Park Hire A Sustainability Manager?

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By Thomas Beck, AIA, NCARB

A sustainability manager would give the town the kick in the rear end it needs to pay attention to the myriad benefits of being a sustainable destination town. What is a Sustainability Manager? An internet search brings up phrases like “manages an organization’s sustainability programs” and “responsible for keeping track of a company’s environmental impact.” More results include evaluating resources used, and recycling initiatives. Another search result includes a job description which includes being “in charge of developing, implementing and monitoring organizational environment strategies.” Refining the search to “degree in sustainability management Colorado” we find programs and degrees at University of Colorado Boulder, Colorado State University, University of Denver, Colorado Mountain College, Western Colorado University, and University of Northern Colorado, just to name the top search results. In Estes Park practical application of a Sustainability Manager position would include identifying and applying for the numerous grants available to fund sustainable projects, coordinate between departments, identify actions that are working and ones which must be prioritized to increase our perceived and actual sustainability as a community.

In the process of researching, we came across a program in place in Columbus, Ohio, called GreenSpot, where we found a downloadable guide titled “The Business Case for a Sustainability Manager.” The first sentence in the introduction quotes the United Nations in defining sustainability as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” This guide is rich with information about financial benefits and successes in businesses and organizations directly resulting from their recruitment of a Sustainability Manager.

In Colorado, the Town of Superior lists two staffers, a Sustainability Analyst and a Sustainability Specialist. When we look at the Town’s 2022 Sustainability Action Plan we read a very accessible document full of both strategies and actions. Page 17 of Superior’s plan lists their current conditions, including the Town facilities receiving “100% of electricity needs from onsite solar arrays coupled with Xcel Energy’s Windsource program.” Their energy strategies (page 19) include Implementing additional permitting fees for new construction and renovations that include gas appliances, furnaces and water heaters, funds to be used for an incentive program for non-fossil fuel appliance alternatives. The proposed actions also include a Net Zero Energy building code.

The City of Steamboat Springs, another small Colorado mountain town with a robust tourist industry, has a full page dedicated to links for the ways “the city, along with its partners, is working to spur change across the Yampa Valley.” Our town could learn some possible strategies by reading about the City’s \$45,000 in Sustainability Incentives for special events, in which event producers can apply for payments, like the impressive “Level 4, Zero Waste. Staff/manned trash, recycle, compost stations as needed for event size. Pays 75% of the cost up to \$5,000.” Think about how much more sustainable our numerous events would be if the town of Estes Park would fund incentives for sustainable waste management.

The Steamboat Chamber has a page that lists ways to “Make Your Visit To Steamboat Springs A Sustainable One”. They also refer to the Yampa Valley Sustainability Council, an organization with a large staff and internship opportunities. Another Chamber website page directs one to business resources for sustainability.

We are aware that here in Estes Park, Visit Estes Park has a Senior Manager, Community Relations and Sustainability. The VEP website lists the “Do Estes Right” video series to highlight simple ways that travelers can have a sustainable visitor experience. Notably, the short video “Leave No Trace” encourages packing in and packing out, leaving the rocks and wildflowers for the next visitors, and resisting carving one’s name on the aspen trees. These videos are a great start, and our town can do much better in offering a sustainable destination experience.

For example, how about finding the word “sustainable” or “sustainability” on the Town of Estes Park homepage? A search for either word brings up links to the sustainability task force and its report. Click on recycling and we get the League of Women Voters website resource. Thank you LWV for your continued commitment to sustainability in the Estes Valley. The Estes Chamber of Commerce website also lacks any mention of sustainability on the home page or drop-down links.

In the Estes Forward Comprehensive Plan of 2022, a search for the word sustainable results in 4 occurrences in the 112-page plan, two of which refer to the Environmental Sustainability Task Force and its final report of January 31, 2022. The search for “sustainability” awards us with 12 results, most of which are also in the title of the task force.

It is discouraging that our town seems to have very little sense of what a powerful tool sustainability can be as a destination for visitors. A comparison of our town’s website and the City of Steamboat website (and Chamber) and the Town of Superior website (with a Department of Sustainability) gives a definite vibe as to our priorities as a community.

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