

Kristen Hayden & Sydney Turner, Region 1 Planning Council

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Rockford, environmental challenges, region, electric vehicles, corridors, areas, people, infrastructure, active transportation, plan, sustainability, creek, issues, planning, ensuring, green, greenway, project, environmental, prioritizing

Haley: Welcome back to the green exploration Rockford podcast. My name is Haley Dahl, and today I'll be meeting with Kristin Hayden and Sydney Turner, from Region 1 Planning Council to discuss Rockford's environmental issues, and specifically how the implementation of inclusive green or sustainable infrastructure can offer viable solutions to these problems. ***Intro Music*** I'm looking forward to this conversation, so without further ado, we can begin. And I would love for you guys to take a minute to introduce yourself for the podcast.

Sydney: I am Sydney Turner. Special planning here at R1PC. My focus is really kind of overseeing things related to transportation and land use. And so for transportation specifically, we cover a three County area, so we're looking at Winnebago County, Boone County, and Ogle County. Not all of Ogle County, in just the kind of easternmost portion. So down to Byron. And then land use, we do planning on a as needed basis as a consulting service to local government. And so that would be updates to comprehensive plans, corridor plans, things of that nature.

Kristen: I was a Green Region Crops member and I'm starting full time with RPC on Monday. And my position with that will be Health Equity Associate. So it include environmental stuff and moving slightly more into the mental health field. Yeah that's it. ***laughs***

Haley: ***laughs*** What projects is the R1 Planning Council currently working on?

Sydney: Sure, so we have quite a few right now related to sustainability. And so the first one I'll kind of talk about is our greenways plan and map. So our greenways plan is specifically looking at the open spaces, conservation districts, parks, as well as some of the green corridors that we have within our

region, and promoting their youth from a recreational standpoint from a transportation, but as well as from a conservation standpoint, and making sure that those areas that are environmentally sensitive, are protected and conserved for future generations.

Haley: Kristen, do you have anything to add to that question?

Kristen: Um, I think that's the, that's the most major project we sort of just finished up. It's in public comment right now, isn't it?

Sydney: Yeah, I actually have two documents in public comment period related sustainability. So the other big project is, we are out for public comment on an Electrical Vehical Readiness Plan. So this is looking at how can our region prepare for electric vehicles, and making sure that there is the infrastructure in place to support them. And so, looking at tradition of public and private, what would be the best locations for those charging stations, as well as identifying what policies or practices we need to put in place to ensure that we're ready as a region for the increase that we'll be seeing over the next five to 10 years, as more and more automakers are committing to electrical, electric vehicles. And then the second part of that is promoting the use and adoption of electrical vehicles. So really gauging what is some of the hindrance to ownership of electric vehicles, as well as just the education of the benefit of electric vehicles. And so those benefits include the environmental component that does reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, as well as just better energy. As far as vehicle goes, we still need to see how electric vehicles may impact the grid from the energy standpoint, but also some of the financial benefits of owning electric vehicles. And so those would be, I would say, our two biggest projects right now related to sustainability within our region.

Haley: So regarding the project, what would you say are the biggest hindrances in that?

Sydney: For ownership or for Instructure? I can talk about both of them. So the ownership, what is a lot of hindrance for people purchasing electric vehicles would be they are a little bit more expensive than traditional internal combustion engine vehicle. The other thing is what is known as range anxiety. Knowing if there will be charging infrastructure in place when you need it. So if you're going on a long road trip, how can you ensure that there will be a charging station when your battery is starting to deplete? So that's kind of the two big things that hinder people from purchasing electric vehicles. Some of the things that kind of hinder the implementation of electric vehicle charging infrastructure is the cost. So from a public charging infrastructure, is, you know, it's a matter of having to have electricians come out and wire within a parking lot, and all the construction costs that might occur, and things of that nature, but also just that business model of how it will be operated. So is it going to be privately operated, but publicly owned? Is it going to be publicly owned and operated? And the very business models and kind of looking at those two components and try to say, "How much is it going to cost? And then how will it be operated?" So those are kind of the biggest hurdles for public charging infrastructure.

Haley: Moving forward, what environmental challenges Would you say that Rockford has struggled with most in the past? And how has this changed or evolved, hows or whys?

Kristen: One thing I have been thinking about working on is the, sort of the industrial history of Rockford. And there are a lot of Brownfield and Superfund sites, Super sites where there is pollution. And I think there's, there's some work going on around that. But again, I only moved here a couple of months ago, so I'm still learning about all of these things.

Haley: Yeah, no.

Kristen: Um, so that's something that I know various neighborhoods work with. Another thing that we've been, I've been learning about is sort of climate change moving forward, will increase flooding and heat issues in the region. And that's something the, the whole Midwest will struggle with, but it's something that we're starting to plan for.

Haley: You said that's something we've been starting to plan for, would you be able to go into detail in regards to that?

Kristen: So some of the stuff was worked into the, the greenways plan and that kind of, kind of developed the urban canopy.

Sydney: So, so some of the things that, as a region, we have been looking into, and it goes back into the greenway planning, is looking at both of the creeks that run through urban areas within the region, and how do we ensure that the quality of those creeks are high, as well as ensuring that flooding is under control related to that, and a lot of that is coming from stormwater runoff from having impervious pavement as any Midwestern or urbanized area really happens. And so taking a look at some of those particular creek corridors and ensuring that we're rehabilitating some areas of those, and then, like I mentioned, improving the water quality, ensuring that the water quality today is at an optimal level. And so one of the biggest kind of creeks or focus areas, the last couple of decades, have been the Keith Creek corridor, and looking at what infrastructure needs to be either replaced or removed to improve that corridor as a whole. And then looking at some of the water quality issues surrounding that creek. So I would say that's kind of one of those areas that has been an ongoing planning related to flooding and the water in our area.

Kristen: It also tends to be a justice issue because the, the same neighborhoods get flooded over and over again.

Sydney: So yeah that's a good point. Some of the areas in which the Keith Creek in particular through are some of higher minority areas in our community. So looking at those environmental justice, duration, with our planning, or to development or redevelopment of creek, ensuring that we're addressing some of those issues as well. And so that might be access to parks and open space or providing to youth paths for health, public health purposes and technician purposes. You know, connecting to school, home, things of that nature. So that point of the plan that we'll get on and I should have mentioned this, we did receive funding to conduct a study on the Keith Creek corridor that we'll be kicking off in the next few weeks.

Haley: Oh, that's exciting. Will those findings be posted anywhere?

Sydney: Yes. So it will be a roughly 18-month project. And we will be developing a study from the findings of data from the strategies and goals that are related to that corridor. And that will all be publicly available on our website. But as I mentioned, it's a 18 month to two year project, so the final result will not be for a while.

Haley: Yeah, no, I find it really interesting that you guys have mentioned that the Keith Creek and the impermeable surfaces because I was interviewing Brad Roos yesterday, and he was talking about the same thing, especially in regards to the Keith Creek. So it's interesting how big of a problem that water retention really is. Because it's something I feel like a lot of people don't entirely think about, you know, they have their water cups. Maybe they like drink half their water, and then they just dump it down the drain. And then they don't really think about where the water goes after that.

Sydney: Yeah, I think across the world, you know, we have these floods, from extensive rain and it's projected that these issues will get worse and worse. And so when you have concrete, where does the water go? Right? It has to go somewhere, so where is that going? And most of the time, it's running off into creeks and rivers, such as, you know, the Chicago River, or here, we're right next to the Rock River. And so we have water that's running off of some of these concrete or asphalt services, you also have, you know, the oil and gas and the chemical, and those are running into rivers and creeks. And so we need to be cognizant of that in the future on how we plan for that, because water resources, you know, as you mentioned, are kind of overlooked sometimes, but it's, there's still integral through our lives. I think, when we talk about water issues, you know, the thing that comes to everyone's mind is what happened in Flint, Michigan. Situations like that don't happen again. You know, and that was just infrastructure, right? That wasn't even water runoff.

Haley: Yeah.

Sydney: That was the infrastructure that they had, as far as the pipes, so I think, you know, water, in my opinion is going to be one of those environmental challenges that as a world gonna have to focus in on.

Haley: Actually, I wrote a paper on Flint, Michigan, a research paper, my freshman year as well. I'm very interested in water resource, to do that better and more sustainably and more inclusively. Moving forward with this interview, based on your knowledge and engagement, what work is being... well, I feel like we've definitely touched on this, you know, what work has been being done to address these environmental challenges in Rockford. But what would you say that they're doing well, and where are there areas for improvement?

Sydney: To address environmental challenges, is the coordination and collaboration that occurs among different entities, public and private. Just working together to try and address some of these issues and talking about them in forums and offering education to the public and coordinating with different

viewpoints and opinions on that and kind of having a open discussion related to that. I think that's something that our region is doing really well when it comes to kind of addressing some of these environmental challenges and preparing so that what may not be a challenge in Rockford, it doesn't become a challenge in the future.

Haley: Being proactive more than reactive.

Sydney: Yeah, I think we, we have to look at both. So we have to be reactive on what occurred historically, proactive on insurancing that issues, other issues don't arise. Our air quality in Rockford is much better than say Chicago or some of the other major urban areas or even post-industrial regions. But we want to make sure that we're putting strategies in place so air quality doesn't become an issue in the future. So that's why looking at things like EV readiness and being sure that we are reducing greenhouse gas emissions and taking an approach to reduce greenhouse gas emissions is Incorporated. That way, we don't have issues with air quality in the future.

Haley: So you know, I'm someone who's lived in the Rockford/Belvidere area my whole life, and there is definitely very diverse... you were talking about, like viewpoints, so like ideologies in regards to... just especially with things like environmental and social justice issues, I feel like there's a very diverse mindsets across this region and I'm just wondering how you account for that.

Sydney: We have a committee, called the environmental committee, that bring different groups together to talk about stuff that's kind of collaboration that I was mentioning, and it's not from a particular viewpoint, it tries to incorporate a wide variety of viewpoints, a wide variety of agencies who might have different opinions on how to address something, but it's getting everyone on the same table and having open discussion and the ability to listen to other viewpoints and providing a venue that other viewpoints can be discussed. And I think that's how, regardless of what the topic is, that's a great strategy of what you're talking about whether it's environmental issues, or you know, environmental justice, public safety, anything, any aspect of our society.

Haley: Piggybacking on everything that was done well, then where does Rockford have room for improvement?

Kristen: Any place, like any place, always working on the injustices that have occurred and working out ways to fix that. And that's something we are working on, but always does need improvement and continue to incorporate sustainable, sustainability and, and justice work into that economic stuff, because there's a lot of push for economic stability in the region and, and working to rebuild global wealth. Yeah, but again, should continue to work on, so...

Haley: Alrighty, so moving forward, we've touched on some green infrastructure in regards to like the EV charging stations, but I'd like to know more, honestly, about the green infrastructure that's planned with the, the water resources, you know, whether that be like green spaces, anything like that. So what infrastructure improvements have you seen or been a part of that has provided solutions to Rockford's environmental challenges? Like I said, I think, I feel like we've touched on that, but...

Sydney: Our region has seen an increase in active transportation, in walking as primary transportation mode, instead of just as a recreational mode. What's been seen over the past decade, I would say is increasing number of shared use paths, as well as bicycle lanes to kind of promote active transportation. As a part of that that ties directly kind of into those greenway corridors we were talking about earlier, because a lot of those greenway corridors are perfect locations to provide those types of facilities and active transportation facilities, where people have access to fresh air on their, you know, bike ride or walk and can benefit from some of those other items that are related to having open green space available, and has definitely seen an increase in the active transportation facilities offered.

Kristen: I guess, so with the greenways plan, I think there's a, a push to add more greenways, hopefully to put those in places where there aren't more greenways, but I think that's, that's kind of a future thing. It's not like a... because we just published the plan so...

Haley: With these greenway plans, is there permeable concrete? Is that an idea that Rockford has been considering?

Sydney: We look from our regional standpoint, but I know that bioswales, you know, different solutions as far as drainage goes with new stormwater runoff has been promoted in a few of our document as, you know, options to assist in some of that. Those types of things have been in, included in various plans and will probably continue promoted within those regional plans.

Haley: Alrighty, so with all these environmental challenges and all these proposed solutions, what are both of your thoughts on Rockford prioritizing these solutions to the environmental challenges? I know you mentioned that Rockford seems to be pretty proactive, so do you have anything to add in regards to that?

Sydney: I don't necessarily know one solution over another or prioritizing one challenge or another because various agencies or non-profit organization cover different topic areas and so I think it's working together and not necessarily focusing, okay, we can only, we should only be focusing on, you know, one component of this environmental challenge because agencies who might be able to approach a different one due to their, you know, aspect of what they cover, so it's about balancing, not necessarily prioritizing.

Haley: I like that, I like that because in regards to any type of societal challenge, like I feel like people have a tendency to pigeonhole themselves into one place, whether it's like social justice issues or environmental issues or economic issues, but everything is so interrelated. Like you can't focus on just one thing, it's very important to look at, holistically at these issues because at the end of the day, they all affect each other and if you just focus on one, then you're neglecting many other ones. So I really like that insight that you shared. So you know, you've touched on some of these social justice issues in Rockford. So I guess I was wondering if you guys could go more in depth about that in regards to the Keith Creek, like, what neighborhood that affects, and how Rockford has been moving to implement more inclusive solutions, so that we're not leaving anyone behind?

Kristen: Yeah, well, I guess the first thing, I reported on this, so this is my limited experience, but something that I've noticed is that there's a lot of research done and included into documents that we publish about where these are and, and, like bring to light that there are disparities, which is always the first step to figuring out how to fix them. **And so I think that ,I think that integration, being public and used to make plans will help prioritize fixing these issues.**

Haley: For sure, awareness is definitely the first step.

Kristen: The Council and the city and people are very aware of these issues, and are figuring ways to fix them.

Haley: A beautiful thing for sure. So Rockford is definitely a very diverse community and I feel like that has to play a large role as to how people are so aware of these issues, because, you know, it's so important to love your neighbor. Because, like, I see a lot of issues when I'm staying in Chicago, where they will improve infrastructure, whether it be transportation or water, but it seems to always be in the more affluent neighborhoods, you know, on like the north side and stuff and seems like those infrastructure plans tend to forget the people on the west side, or the people on the south side of Chicago. And listening to what you guys have said today about how Rockford has been researching how these issues have been disproportionately affecting **low-income and(add?)** BIPOC communities is just, it's, it makes me very hopeful. Because I wasn't sure what I was gonna find starting these interviews, you know, I wasn't sure if people were not going to be aware, I wasn't even sure if people were going to be receptive to the idea that there could be environmental disparity. I, I, so like, I'm really, I don't know, I'm really happy to hear all this stuff because I just want to see our community thrive and I want that to include everybody. I really appreciate you guys sharing your insight. And well, that being said, I hope everyone learned something from today's conversation. And thank you again for your time, as I really appreciate both of you sharing your knowledge and insight. So yeah, that's pretty much all I have to say. *laughs*

Kristen: Thank you!

Sydney: Thank you for thinking of us for an interview.

Haley: Oh yeah, no, I, I really, really enjoyed this, the fact that the research is being conducted, and these things are being thought about that's just really exciting for the Rockford community, so I want to thank you guys for that. I think now would be a good time to wrap up this episode. ***Outro Music*** As always, I would love to thank Kristen Hayden and Sydney Turner for sharing their valuable insight during this discussion. I also would like to thank anyone listening in on this podcast. I really appreciate your continual support of Green Exploration: Rockford. Just a reminder to take whatever you learn from this series, and consider how you, as an individual, can be a contributor to a sustainable future in your day-to-day life. And don't forget to not only show Mother Earth some love, but your fellow humans as well, each and every one of them because all humans deserve to live in a quality environment. My name is Haley Dahl, and I am signing off. Stay green and stay exploring, Rockford.