

Shelby Best, Region 1 Planning Council

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Haley: Hello, my name is Haley Dahl and welcome to another episode of Green Exploration: Rockford. Today I will be speaking with Shelby Best from Region One Planning Council to further discuss sustainability in The Rockford region. ***Intro Music*** I just want to thank you so much for your time and participation. I really, really appreciate it and I am excited to hear about your insight throughout this discussion.

Shelby: Great, happy to provide any.

Haley: Alright, jumping into the first question is just, you know, you can introduce yourself and the first thing I'd like to know is what motivated you to get involved in the environmental challenges in Rockford? Can you please give me some background on your involvement, interest in motivation? And what projects are you currently working on?

Shelby: Sure, my name is Shelby Best. I am the environmental and sustainability specialist with the Region 1 Planning Council. And as far as what got me motivated, I think you'd have to kind of go a little bit further back, probably. I first started getting interested in the environmental movement when I was in college and undergrad. And I had always been passionate about it through various volunteer works and things like that, but for a while my professional career was in marketing and advertising and then I decided to make the leap to switch to focus full time on environmental and sustainability work. So that, I would say, is kind of the reasoning of why I do it. And then as far as kind of what I'm involved in. So obviously from the professional side, I work at Region 1 and we do a lot of different environmental sustainability initiatives. I was brought on originally to kind of help grow this programming and incorporate it more into the various planning work that we do. So that has taken the form of anything from renewable energy, to circular economy, to greenways planning, corridor plantings and the like. As far as outside of work, what I'm involved in in the Rockford area, so I am the Vice President of Sustain Rockford. So that is a local nonprofit focused on sustainability initiatives, which I'm sure you've already heard about and all that. I also am on the board for the Illinois Executive Committee for the Sierra Club,

our local Sierra Club chapter, as well as sit on the board for the keep Northern Illinois Beautiful, a Rockford organization that focuses on recycling and waste management.

Haley: I actually volunteered with them before.

Shelby: Nice! Great. I guess that the reason why, specifically, I got more involved in this area is that, so I had lived away from Rockford for a while and then right before the pandemic happened, I moved back and I've always been wanting to, you know, get more involved in to see a change in the area. And so that's why I've really wanted to get both professionally and, you know, outside of work involved in these various activities so that we can, you know, start hoping to make a difference.

Haley: I really like that. That's honestly why I've started this podcast because, you know, I kind of realized, I've been living in the area for my whole life, excluding when I went to live in Chicago for school, but I realized that I was pretty disconnected in the sense of like, what was actually going on in the community. And I was interested in getting more connected to this community. And I was just curious as to see what was going on and how things could be improved or are working on being improved. That being said, Do you have any projects that you're currently working on that you'd like to talk about?

Shelby: Yes, I mean, currently, we are just about to launch the Keith Creek corridor study and corridor plan, which so Keith Creek is the, you know, relatively small creek that runs through most of Winnebago County, which incorporates Rockford and whatnot. And there has been a lot of issues with Keith Creek over the years as far as flooding goes, and we've implemented, or the City's implemented, various things like the concrete barriers, which are now deteriorating. They bought back different properties and demolished the buildings to create more of a floodplain, but you know, there's still a lot of work that needs to be done and so what we're launching this study to really, hopefully collaborate with all the various, you know, community partners and community initiatives to think about, you know, what are the ways that we can reimagine this corridor from that flood perspective, from a transportation perspective, but then also from that economic development perspective, right?

Haley: I really like that. It's always good to hear when people are taking the necessary steps to improve the community, so I really appreciate that. Is there anything else you'd like to add there?

Shelby: So we're also just wrapping up our Greenways Plan. So that's a regional Greenways Plan that we work with a variety of community organizations for that to really map out and put onto like a mapping format where we envision Greenway development, like what are some priority areas that we want to make sure that's protected, whether that's through public organizations or private organizations, and then also show, you know, current areas that are currently protected. So if whoever members of the public want to go and see something like that, then we've created an interactive map that people can, you know, click on and off various layers that provide them with details, things like endangered species habitats, like you know, areas that you want to protect versus floodplains versus bike trails and things like that. So it's pretty comprehensive. And I think it's a major upgrade from our last one, so I'm excited about that.

Haley: You know, I like the sound of that, because I feel like in a lot of urban environments, people are very detached from what it means to be connected with nature. And I believe that comes from, you know, kind of like that bubble, that the gray infrastructure that urban communities inadvertently create. You know, hearing about implementing things that tie the community to the environment, I feel like that's a great way to educate the community on ecological things in the area, which will, you know, of course, I feel like if people are more connected with nature, there'll be more susceptible to understanding and wanting to accept necessary environmental policymaking that needs to be done to further the community, and make it more sustainable. I would like to know how you define environmental challenges, how would you define the parameters of environmental challenges in Rockford?

Shelby: I always think of environmental as living within the larger sustainability realm. So the way I see sustainability is through environmental, your social and your economic pieces. And so environmental challenges I see as basically a subset of larger sustainability issues. And because I don't think that environmental challenges exist in a silo, right? They're usually because of some other type of initiative or project or something like that, that has led to those environmental issues in the first place, right? That's kind of how I really view as environmental challenges. And as far as, you know, specific ones that exist in the Rockford area, I guess that we were pretty blessed in that, you know, we are somewhat of a smaller city, and we haven't had too many issues to deal with as far as major environmental problems go. But I think we face that making sure that we're prepared and resilient for future climate change initiatives and issues that come up, because we do have a river that runs through the city, there is quite a bit of flooding that happens, you know, with those homes who are right along the river, and becoming more prepared for things like that for greater tornado events that happen, right, so making sure that we have that ready to plan for that. And then we do face those problems with population growth and, and making sure that we're addressing sprawl correctly and that we're not, you know, destroying the various green spaces that we have left. So that's another issue to consider, especially as you know, we start having more, more vehicles, more cars, and making sure like, how are we growing as a community in a way that lends itself to a sustainable future that's maybe not entirely dependent on car driven travel? So, really I think it kind of goes back to that forward thinking and making sure that while we might not have any significant environmental challenges now, we still have some and how are we going to deal when it gets even worse in the future.

Haley: Essentially being proactive versus reactive as a community?

Shelby: Exactly.

Haley: You brought up urban sprawl, addressing urban sprawl correctly. I would like to actually dive a little bit deeper there. I know there's been a lot of development going on. So I was just wondering, how has that been monitored to be more sustainable.

Shelby: So it's a little bit tricky in that while we're a regional council and we can provide regional plans, what ends up happening, you know, on that municipal, city level is not really up to us per se. So from like the planning organizations perspective, we definitely you know, members of our board are usually you know, the leaders of these various counties and municipalities, so we obviously talked to them and

work with them and developing further additional plans, but aside from noting and working with them on that, you know, they're not obliged to tell us when they're doing new developments and we can't really regulate any of that either, aside from giving them our perspective on land use development and zoning and things like that.

Haley: Yeah, like essentially you can lead a horse to water but you can't make them drink.

Shelby: Exactly, yes.

Haley: What environmental challenges has Rockford struggled with the most in the past? What seems to be the most pressing environmental challenges for Rockford currently, has this changed or evolved, how or why?

Shelby: So as far as in the past, it's a little bit tricky for me just because, you know, I was born and raised here, but I left for university and was obviously still pretty much a kid when I was here. As far as, you know, hearing about environmental challenges, I didn't really hear too much about it. But I think that, you know, moving forward, though, into the future, I think water quality is going to be a big challenge for our various waterways, making sure that we're continuing to protect them. I think focusing on groundwater too, as where we're pulling our drinking water from, I don't know if you've heard about Joliet.

Haley: Yeah.

Shelby: So they're already depleting their groundwater aquifers and they're going to start pulling from Lake Michigan. So while most people don't think of the Midwest as having this lack of water, if we're still drawing from it faster than it's being replenished, we will get there. So I think, again, it's that kind of education and awareness piece that most people if you're not really in it, they're really not too much about. So I think that's really important to consider too. And then especially as we continue to get further economic development and growth and making sure that we're continuing to monitor, like I had said, with not only the water quality levels, but making sure like our air pollution as we continue to grow with industry that we're trying to figure out ways to mitigate it. And to make sure that, for example, like you said, with the disadvantaged populations that, you know, they're not bearing the brunt of new industries that develop, making sure it's kind of that equitable, resilient return back to however we're going to be moving forward.

Haley: Yes, you brought this up earlier, actually, like you can't just focus on environmental challenges, because it's definitely very interdisciplinary, holistic problem. It's a huge animal. And I just, I see a lot in the environmentalist movement that a lot of white people driving it. And I feel like because of that a lot of **low-income and** BIPOC communities end up getting forgotten about and it's really important to try to figure out ways to curb that. We'll definitely be touching back on that. So based on your knowledge and engagement, what work is being done to address the environmental challenges in Rockford? What have they been doing well, where are the areas for improvement?

Shelby: So I know there's a lot. There's a really good conservation community, I would say, in Rockford that focuses on protecting wildlife and natural spaces and so I think that there's a really strong presence there and in a good way, and I've been very happy to see that like when I came back and move back to the area that there is such a strong community. I think there are definitely very passionate water people as well here. So again, I think there's, there's a lot of different committees and impromptu groups and involvement, which, which is great to see that there are just so many people that are wanting to get more involved. I would say though, that right now, there are some people trying to work towards that like Sustain Rockford, and in some aspects Region 1 as well, as that cohesive plan that incorporates not only, you know, water and conservation, but from that 50,000 foot view of what does this all look like when we plug that into the larger economy, we plug it into social equity, social justice issues, like you had said, and so I think what, and this is goes not just for our community, but for most communities, what they struggle with is really coming up with that collaborative environment that will allow these different groups to talk to each other, to work together or having that framework or an overarching organization which provides that structure which is then needed to really move forward those discussions and conversations.

Haley: And facilitate more of inclusive legislation and policymaking.

Shelby: Right.

Haley: I definitely agree with you on the natural spaces because until recently, really, I had not really explored Rockford and seeing what the community has to offer. But since I've moved back, you know, due to this whole COVID pandemic, I've really been exploring, you know, going out to Rock Cut, the riverwalk. I feel like Rock Cut is like a diamond in our community. It's a large chunk of just natural land, I don't know, I really appreciate it. And I will drive over there and I will run, I will bike. It's so much fun. And I love to see how they're implementing things like the Greenways Plan to try to get more of the community out there because there's so much that Rockford truly has to offer, naturally, for the community to enjoy. That's going to help with the education and the awareness and just simply people finding that connection back to nature. Life's all about connection: connections with other humans, connections with the earth, and connections with ourself. Can't live without it!

Shelby: Exactly.

Haley: I would like to know more about green infrastructure, such as EV charging stations, accessible public transit, green spaces, etc. Specifically, what infrastructure improvements have you seen or been a part of that has provided solutions to Rockford environmental challenges?

Shelby: So we are, and I don't know when you've spoken with other colleagues if they've brought up our EV charging infrastructure plan? Yeah, so we're working on, you know, developing that framework, an ordinance and recommendations for how to go forward with the proliferation of EV vehicles. How are we going to do public charging? What is it going to look like when putting those ordinances together for charging at home? So I think we've made some pretty good strides there and getting to some sort of that implementation phase now, I think is where now we're trying to switch over to, okay, we have a

general plan, we kind of know what we want to set up, so now is the time that we're trying to transition then more towards having every municipality kind of adopt these ordinances or fit into them as they see fit. But then additionally, working on figuring out how are we going to actually implement these charging stations? Where are they going to go? Who's going to pay for them? So now we're kind of just getting into that next phase? So I would say if they're in a planning perspective, but as far as implementation goes, there hasn't really been much done yet. And that's, I think, the next step from where we would go with that.

Haley: Like the final hurdle.

Shelby: Yeah, yeah, exactly.

Haley: Also, in regards to green infrastructure, you brought up water quality becoming a challenge and focusing on groundwater. I actually just wrote a term paper about sponge cities and how that can be implemented in the Midwest, specifically Chicago, to help curb that problem because I know the greater... oh my gosh I always forget the name of it, but the odor... some cambrin... you know, the big giant aquifer system in the area and how we've been, like you were mentioning earlier, drawing more than it's been regenerating. Prime example, Joliet. So touching back again on the urban sprawl, as well, there's a lot of non-permeable services, whether that be rooftops and concrete, that just diverts the water into runoff and not letting it come back into the ecosystem. So I was just wondering if Rockford has been trying to implement anything to kind of curb that issue whether it be utilizing permeable concrete or incorporating more green spaces, how that's been planned on being addressed.

Shelby: So not to my knowledge, but again, I, since I'm relatively new-ish back to the Rockford area, I don't know if there is that in some of the ordinances just because you know, the Planning Council covers more than Rockford. So since we're not, you know, the specific city government, ourselves, I am not quite sure. I'm not aware of any specific ordinances that exist currently, for most of my knowledge, I believe that it's being done on a project-by-project basis. So if there's a developer who they're really interested in, you know, building sustainably I think you would see it like that, or if it's, you know, a nonprofit that promotes green infrastructure, stormwater management and the like. So those would be kind of the two ways that I think that it's currently being done.

Haley: Is that what the framework would work on addressing, trying to get sustainability more as like a standard rather than a project by project term?

Shelby: Yeah, I think that definitely, it would be ideal. I think there was a green infrastructure plan but to my knowledge, nothing has been updated since then. So I think this would be a really great area you know, to potentially address in the future is updating a regional green infrastructure plan.

Haley: What are your thoughts on Rockford taking action towards implementing solutions to these environmental challenges, and more specifically, in **low-income and** BIPOC neighborhoods compared to other neighborhoods. Do you see a difference in the implementation of environmental solutions?

Shelby: For example, maybe taking back to the, to the green space example, in that, like you said, we have a lot of wonderful natural areas around the city, but I think to date though, not a lot of priority has potentially been given towards green spaces within the city limits because I think most of the thought process behind that has, has been, to my knowledge, that, you know, we want to save the most acreage that we can which, is typically is, you know, outside of city limits, but then by default when you do that you don't really, aside from your parks that you have scattered, you know, throughout the city, it's a little bit different than having natural spaces that are not cultured or maintained and things like that. So I think that in the past that has been the way that that particular example has been approached, but I have seen that it has been changing and there are a lot more initiatives out there now to consider, like how would conservation organizations move forward with purchasing and or protecting land that is in an urban area? I think a lot of people too think that Rockford isn't technically urban, but there is a definite, you know, difference between living in downtown Rockford versus living in Roscoe.

Haley: That's a completely different type of experience. Going back to the green space, would you then say there isn't as much accessibility to green space within the **low-income and** BIPOC communities of Rockford?

Shelby: So I haven't done any official research on that yet, so I can't definitively say. I think there is access, but potentially what might be different is the quality of access and how that, you know, looks for each specific area. So I think that's an area that definitely needs to be looked into more and then I hope that some of my other plans and things like that that we work on creating really served to address this piece and to dive a little bit deeper into figuring out what is, what is the difference and so we have an idea that might exist so how do we get to knowing that data that's going to help us move forward?

Haley: You know, things like the Keith Creek study I'm sure will be a lot of benefit to inclusivity among the community because I believe doesn't the Keith Creek predominantly run through more low-income areas of Rockford?

Shelby: Yes.

Haley: Predominantly those communities?

Shelby: Yeah, it goes through some industrial, you know, it picks up on the Rock through the industrial area and then goes through some of the lower-income communities before, you know, going out towards Boone County.

Haley: Yes, so you would say those communities are usually the ones that are struggling with the problems associated with the Keith Creek?

Shelby: Yeah, I think it has, it's mostly been the concentrated like within the Rockford area. I think there hasn't really been any issues that I have been aware of with, you know, as you go out more towards outside of the city limits towards Boone County's. Yeah, I think it's been mostly centrally located within Rockford.

Haley: Since disparity has been speculated, how can Rockford implement more inclusive solutions moving forward?

Shelby: So I think there has been a lot of, you know, talk around this, not only from my organization, but from the community. I don't know if you're aware of Eliminate Racism 815? They're a community organization that has been really trying to have those conversations with a variety of stakeholders on to how you foster more inclusivity and I think it's important that more local, you know, nonprofit and community organizations get involved with that, and I think from, from our perspective, what we want to try and work on, and this is I think the, the challenge that a lot of planning agencies and public agencies face, is how do you really engage with the community and get them to participate when you're asking for public participation? Right?

Haley: Yeah.

Shelby: So what are these barriers that are holding the community members back from being active engagers? And how can we work to remove those barriers? So I think that's a really critical thing that we can try and remove and that would, by removing that, will really help to increase inclusivity.

Haley: I mean, I feel like, you know, a lot of environmental issues really stem from lack of education or lack of awareness across the entire spectrum, whether it be economic, social justice. I believe it just comes down to understanding one another, understanding our roles in the ecosystem, understanding how our neighbors are being affected by different problems, and then taking the necessary steps to help everybody. I really, really appreciate you taking the time out of your day to participate in my little podcast. I hope, you know, you've learned something from today's conversation I definitely have. So thank you again for your time, and I really appreciate you sharing your knowledge and insight.

Shelby: Great, and I appreciate you asking.

Haley: I think now would be a good time to end this episode. ***Outro Music*** As always, I would love to thank Shelby Best for sharing her valuable insight during this discussion. I also would like to thank anyone listening in on this podcast, I will always appreciate your support of Green Exploration: Rockford. As I always say, 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 not only to 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'm signing off. Stay green and stay exploring, Rockford.