

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE GREEN?

Four decades ago, the environment emerged as a public and political cause in response to growing awareness of the threats posed by air and water pollution and unabated population growth. In recent years, it has stormed back into the public consciousness—this time fueled largely by worldwide scientific consensus on the potentially catastrophic effects of climate change; concern over the depletion of natural resources and nonrenewable energy sources; and growing recognition that the choices we make today will determine the quality of life for those generations yet to come.

In response, individuals, businesses, universities, faith groups, and governments at all levels have begun to recognize the value of adopting “green” or “sustainable” ways of living and doing business. Syracuse University, SUNY-ESF, Le Moyne College, and OCC are among more than 600 colleges and universities nationwide that have pledged to take steps toward becoming carbon neutral. The City of Syracuse itself has embraced the nickname of “Emerald City,” in recognition of efforts to incorporate “green” initiatives into the ways it conducts city business. Onondaga County has embraced green infrastructure and instituted a “Save the Rain” campaign to reduce storm water runoff.

Behind some of this response is the recognition that the benefits of sustainability—loosely defined as meeting the needs of today’s generation without compromising the needs of future generations—extend beyond the environment. “Going green” can spur economic development; attract young people and innovators to our city and region; increase community pride; and enhance the quality of life and health for residents, among other benefits.

But what does it mean to be “green”? What does a sustainable city—or region—look like? How does a commitment to principles of sustainability shape or transform public policy and, by extension, our community? And how can we, as citizens, influence leaders to pursue that objective?