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NEWS WITH A COMPETITIVE EDGE

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What Will it Take to Double
Manufacturing in Washington?

PLUS
Gary Chandler

Energy Equity

In search of a new model for delivering clean energy to everyone.

GORDON FELLER

Urbanova, a public-private partnership based in Spokane, is busy building a smart and connected utility to ensure the clean-energy future doesn't leave anyone behind.



A unique collaboration is underway in Spokane that uses technology in creative ways that will make that city's ecosystems healthier. The partners are serious players: Verizon, Avista Corp., Washington State University, and Itron Corp., one of the world's most innovative tech companies.

These four, working together with city government, have jointly built a nongovernmental organization, Urbanova, to focus on attaining what they call "clean energy equity." They know it will not be an easy undertaking. One reason is history: Electricity was first provided to most U.S. cities and towns between 1900 and the 1920s. However, another 30-plus years passed before systems were in place to fully serve the less prosperous, less populous, or sparsely settled areas. The policies and systems that drove that technology adoption curve also drove the construct of the present energy regulatory environment with all its benefits — and flaws. Equitable energy and environmental outcomes will depend on our collective redefinition of the problem that we're trying to solve.

At A Glance

The current policies and systems guiding the energy regulatory environment are largely built on a framework used to provide electricity to U.S. cities and towns between 1900 and the 1920s.

Urbanova, a nonprofit founded in Spokane in 2016, is working to develop a new model that ensures more equitable and inclusive outcomes.

Projects have included smart and connected streetlights, hyperlocal air quality, shared energy economy microgrid, and digital equity.

Clean energy initiatives have mostly been modeled on the same system by which electricity originally made its way to most every household — top down. Achieving more equitable and inclusive outcomes, especially for those most vulnerable to disasters (be they natural or man-made), requires us to measure the lived experience of those whom our advanced clean energy systems serve. Careful listening, inclusion of both qualitative and quantitative data, and cross-sector collaboration — these are the keys to a more equitable clean energy future.

ONE NONPROFIT STEPS UP TO THE CHALLENGE

Urbanova, an urban innovation partnership focused on driving equitable solutions for midsize cities, was founded in Spokane in 2016. The goal was straightforward: to harness the power of multi-sector collaboration to solve some of the most vexing problems faced by communities.

The momentum behind Urbanova's development was a small cluster of "smart and connected utility" initiatives of two of Urbanova's founding partners. The first is Avista and they're headquartered in Spokane. The second, Itron, is the world's leading provider of edge-intelligence for the distribution grid. Urbanova's challenge from these partners was to help cities like Spokane harness the power of data and technology to measurably improve the livelihoods of their citizens. Urbanova's partners also include the city government of Spokane; the region's research institution, Washington State University; other higher education partners; private sector partners in several areas, including data analytics, smart networks; software, services, meters, sensors, intelligent and healthy buildings, the social and behavioral sciences.

Proof-point projects in three cities — Spokane, Cleveland, and Tulsa — have included smart and connected streetlights, hyper-local air quality, shared energy economy microgrid, studies in reducing the utility burden and improving affordability, safe and secure outdoor spaces, electric shared mobility, and digital equity.

"At Urbanova we're asking: Who's been missing from previous conversations? How do we break the cycle of compounding, disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable in our communities?" said Kim Zentz, Urbanova CEO. Each community is only as strong and resilient as its most underserved and highly impacted neighborhood. Zentz emphasizes: "More importantly: how do we measure that any progress has been made to improve the lived experience and livelihoods in these neighborhoods?"

RE-THINKING THE APPROACH

Recently organizations have recommitted to fairness and inclusion initiatives. Proclamations have been made, billions of dollars have been committed, but there is little attention being paid to how we will measure the impact and outcomes of these promises.

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At the city level, the gap in understanding is largely attributed to the fact that most cities lack an authentic appraisal of the lived experience of residents of each neighborhood. Only through elevating the voice of the residents can city leaders begin to develop actionable plans to garner the community trust needed to ensure a clear return on investment for city stakeholders. Urbanova has partnered with Gallup to solve this challenge and fill this gap by creating a place-based, research-informed mechanism to measure resident voice at the neighborhood and citywide level to measurably improve the equity and resilience of cities.

This approach begins by assessing the community quantitatively and qualitatively to guide public and private partner efforts to measurably improve the lives of residents. The aim is to understand the problems experienced by those who live in the community before offering up solutions. Then working to define metrics of success and to achieve alignment between and among community partners best equipped to provide solutions.

MULTI-SECTOR COLLABORATIONS

While midsize cities enjoy an agility that eludes larger metros, the challenges of making ends meet in the face of uncertainty and rapidly evolving situations is a particular challenge as budgets are notoriously fragile and afford no room for course corrections. Furthermore, the private sector, national initiatives and large philanthropic efforts tend to target the large metro areas, leaving the midsize communities to fend for themselves.

Even given these challenges, the midsize city is the ideal proving ground to scale initiatives to the more densely populated areas of the country. Urbanova and collaborators are combining resources, aligning objectives, and following the expressed needs raised by residents. This enables them to more readily identify the metrics and measures that will define collective success, and which can be tracked over time. The stories that emerge, the lessons-learned and the work yet-to-be-done, help keep the coalition of willing partners together with the long-term objective of equipping the neighborhood to ably control its own destiny.

Urbanova knows the challenges facing society are more complex than any one organization, sector or any small group of collaborators can solve on their own. The promise of climate-smart and climate-resilient cities is a massive innovation challenge. But there is little to no innovation without connection, collaboration, and inclusion of multiple points of view. From the diversity of Urbanova's founding team, to the ecosystem built around Urbanova in midsize cities like Cleveland and Spokane, this small NGO is busy building coalitions.

Clean energy initiatives in every market will do well to challenge the conventions of the past. This will be important if the proponents are serious about achieving authentic equity and resilience. Among the lessons from Urbanova: Think big, start small, go fast, and keep listening and learning. ☰

Gordon Feller serves on the board of directors of Urbanova and formerly served as an Obama/Biden appointee on the U.S. Dept of Energy's technology risk advisory board. He served for years as an executive at Cisco's global HQ. Twitter: @GordonFeller. (Gordon@GordonFeller.com)

