

# Summary of Step4/5 Interviews

## Overview

One of the roles of the GreenStep program is to challenge communities to achieve their sustainability and quality-of-life goals. For cities and tribal nations at Step 5 we wanted to see if GreenStep is still providing motivation and a challenge. As part of our role to support communities in their efforts, we also wanted to identify and receive feedback on new options of engagement and recognition.

In this effort we conducted interviews between December 2024 – March 2025 with the GreenStep Coordinators (GSC). We were able to meet with 84% of the 43 communities that are at Step 4 and 5. Of the 36 communities we met with 6 were in-person meetings, 27 were virtual and we received written feedback from 2 communities.

## Key Themes

- The three largest challenges are staff turnover and capacity; having access to consistent funding; and maintaining political support and will.
- Most communities do not want to graduate, they want additional ways to engage, and communities that want to graduate don't find continued metrics reporting to be meeting a need.
- GreenStep Coordinators (GSCs) were open to a structured mentor/peer opportunity, with a broad view on how cities should be matched. There is interest in learning how others are planning and completing projects.
- Communities think GreenStep is working and do not want to participate in similar national programs, like LEED for Cities and Communities.
- Everyone finds value in being highlighted either by highlighting within GSC network (internal) to knowledge share or to an external audience (residents, elected officials, other depts) to show value of GreenStep program.

## Key Recommendations

- Review and update GreenStep engagement plan to bolster in-person learning and connection; highlight the work communities are doing; and recognize the staff doing the work.
- Reimagine the requirements for Step 4 & 5 to link back to action reporting and foster engagement.
- Define and create more clarity about the differences between GreenStep and Gold Leaf for participants.
- Add support for GreenStep Cities and Tribal Nations with navigating how their climate action plans work with GreenStep, including helping them update plans.
- Create a Milestone Recognition - 5, 10, 15 years in the program.
- Create a peer mentorship program that connects small groups of GreenStep coordinators.

## Additional Themes by Category

### Challenges

- **Staff turnover and capacity**
  - There is a loss of momentum and institutional knowledge with staff turnover. Takes new employee time to learn GreenStep reporting and often a lack of documentation on how metrics were determined.
  - Whether it's a community with 2-3 staff or GreenStep is a fraction of a staff member's position, all cities indicated capacity and time were a challenge.
- **Consistent Funding**
  - Communities have small budgets allocated or no specific budget for sustainability and are reliant on other department budgets.
  - Grants are a key funding source and drive the direction of the projects.
- **Political Support and Will**
  - Elected officials' support is key to moving forward a project, but it can ebb and flow.
  - Helps to focus on the cost savings, safety, clean air/water benefits of a project, which often goes hand in hand with climate adaptation and resilience.
  - Leaders enjoy the recognition of the GreenStep program, and it is a motivator.

### Current Engagement

- **Communities are balancing competing priorities**
  - GSC/City or Tribal nation staff often must choose between doing the actions and reporting the actions.
  - Most cities are participating in several programs, Charging smart, Sol Smart, Tree City program.
  - Step 5 GSCs are not using the metrics outside of GreenStep reporting or some have their own metrics that don't align with GreenStep and are double reporting.
  - **GSCs engage most with GreenStep in March during reporting season.** Then it's very sporadic the rest of the year; read emails and maybe attend a few webinars but minimal active engagement.
- **GSCs would like ways to compare their actions and metrics to other cities.** Some GSCs were not aware of the Step4/5 dashboard, but others were and thought it could be improved on.
- **GreenStep staff are supportive, helpful and a key asset of the program.** There was a lot of appreciation for Kristin's work shared by GSCs.
- **Local climate action plans influence the focus of work and motivation**

- Communities who have a Climate Action plan (CAP) are focusing their work on meeting their CAP goals/action verse using GreenStep/ Gold Leaf goals and actions.
- Some goals and actions in their CAP are not represented in a GreenStep action or metric.
- Communities without climate plans use GreenStep or Gold-leaf as their “plan.”

## Continuing at Step 5

- **Most communities do not want to graduate, they want additional ways to engage.**
  - No end to sustainability work so graduation can’t be based on “we did it” but could recognize the work is moving beyond the GreenStep program.
  - GreenStep still can be a motivator to tackle certain projects for elected officials and departments.
  - GreenStep reporting provides the GSC a touchpoint to meet with staff from other departments that they may not otherwise have.
  - Continuing to report metrics can become stagnated after several years. Need additional ways to engage or to graduate out of the program.
- GSC’s that want to graduate don’t find continued metrics reporting to be meeting a need.
- Some communities expressed concern about continuing to improve on metrics year over year and maintaining Step 5.

## Gold Leaf

- **Lack of capacity for an additional challenge is the most common reason for not participating.**
- Participants in Gold Leaf indicated Gold Leaf aligned with projects they were already planning or working on.
- **Confusion if Gold Leaf was “Step 6” and how it related to the GreenStep program.**

## LEED

- **Not a lot of interest due to cost, time and challenge of reporting.**
- Preference is to participate in a local or state program. Provides a local feel, there are geographic similarities and the same state government structure.
- **GreenStep is meeting the need.**

## Mentorship

- **The majority of GSCs indicated interest in participating in a mentorship/peer program or would after learning more.** (14 yes, 14 maybe, 7 not interested currently)
  - Majority of people would view it as peer to peer as opposed to mentor to mentee
  - Many GSCs were not a part of their community moving from Step 1-3 to Step 4-5, therefore do not feel knowledgeable on how to mentor Step 1-3 cities.

- **GSCs are already participating in formal and informal networking**
  - There are informal networks of sustainability coordinators mostly in the metro area
  - Formal networks include USDN; waste/recycling network; planning network; community energy network (GPI).
  - **GSCs who are not in a sustainability role but rather it's a percentage of their responsibilities have less access to the informal networks** but may have less capacity to engage. There was interest in participating by this group, 8 out of 14 who said yes to participating were not "sustainability cords."
- **Action item can provide encouragement to participate but most GSCs who were interested would without it.** Also Step 5 cities don't report actions currently.

## Community Highlights

- **They all find value in being highlighted**
  - Practical value in highlighting within GSC network (internal) to knowledge share
  - Value in highlighting to an external audience (resident, elected officials, other depts) to show the value of GreenStep program.
- **Communities have varying levels of communication support to highlight their work.**
- **Top Choices were Case Studies and Articles.**
  - Case Studies were the top choice, 26 yes. GSC's want to know the details of how communities planned, funded and completed the actions projects.
  - Articles were the second most popular (19 yes)
  - Podcasts had the most voiced "no" but some love them.
  - Newsletters were more neutral. Many like the current newsletter and use the data from it to share out in their communications.
  - Social media was neutral. Some expressed it can be helpful with external audiences but unclear who the audience of GreenStep social media.
  - Exhibit was the least chosen and was mostly associated the Eco experience. One GSC suggested a rotating exhibit moving around city halls or public spaces.
- GSCs were able to list several successes the last year but less had an action they wanted us to highlight

## Recognition

- **Staff are less likely to attend the LMC event,** so they are not being recognized for their work when GreenStep awards are given out.
- **Elected Officials like the GreenStep recognition.**
- There was generally a consensus that recognition can motivate progress forward but for the GSC it doesn't drive their work.
- **Milestone years was the most popular.** It's a good external recognition that is easy for residents to understand.

- **Actions (50, 75, 100) was the second most popular.**
- Action star rating goals and reaching metric goals were often viewed as hard to understand. City Council and residents wouldn't connect with them.

## Additional Recommendations by Category

### Community Highlights and Recognition

- Podcast – Pitch to a local podcast that GreenStep should be a topic/guest. Climate Corner was suggested by a few people. MPR would be a good outlet to be featured on, options could include, Minnesota Now or Climate Cast.
- Find paths to amplify the communications that communities are already using
  - Sign up for the city newsletters – Several GSC indicated their projects will be written up in the city newsletters.
  - Encourage them to share back stories and articles they already have together.
- Have an event to recognize the GSCs that are working on the actions and reporting. This would be in addition to the LMC event where blocks are handed out.

### Mentorship/Peer Networking

- Create a peer mentorship program that connects small groups of GreenStep coordinators.
  - Match cities by population, region and/or projects.
  - Use an annual survey to see what people are working on next to help group participants.
- Build out a listserv community or an informal way to ask questions of the group. (Linked-In group, Slack, LMC Listserv, Google group)
- Make it clear to participants that the mentoring program is not to help another community with their GreenStep reporting, GreenStep staff are here for technical assistance.
- Create a Mentorship/Peer Network handbook with guided questions and details of the program to create structure.

### Ideas Direct from GSCs

- Assistance with creating a sustainability/climate plan, the city doesn't have anyone to take the lead and guidance on creating buy-in within.
- Creation of action plan – aligning with BP.

- Help reviewing city Climate action plans annually. They worked with Blue Dot previously but GreenStep could help review plans and provide guidance on updating them.
- If content is created by GreenStep, it can be shared by a lot of different people and the city can promote it as well. Newspapers in smaller towns are harder to get to because there are fewer local newspapers.
- LMC listserv – liked when someone else asked about franchise fees but hasn't used it to send out. Could be a way to connect.
- Working with cities who are just dipping their toes, creative recognition, facilitating participation beyond the reporting.
- Look at how climate plans interact with GreenStep; Streamlining program to interact with plans.
- Pursuing the cohort idea, create regional support; focus on a single area, looking at one type of project.
- Add more context about each grant or examples of what the grant can be used for.
- Awards at League of MN and staff members are not there. Have an event for staff members.
- Create additional ways to compare to other communities, see what they are doing
- Create more structure around updating actions and the star rating.
- Create a link/site for each city they could link to that is resident friendly.
- Give out awards at different venues; not just LMC because staff don't attend those. GreenStep conf where staff can link up and invite state level officials or non-GreenStep cities.
- Likes the annual newsletter, it's a good summary. Could increase length, frequency to demonstrate the collective impact, and share it more broadly
- Metric reporting spreadsheet: the metric numbers and the BP numbers don't align (Metric 1 is not BP; and the "core" color is yellows which is a column color too, can be confusing).
- The charging smart spreadsheet has a column to connect action to metric with a drop down to indicate status of action/project, add this to metrics spreadsheet.
- Have an annual GS refresh where you go over the program basics again, like action items and metrics. Helps to connect the links once a year.
- Would like to see more in-person events, such as a luncheon. Glad that GreenStep is building a community for the GreenStep coordinators.
- Annual report – update quotes and social media examples, have been the same the last few years.
- Dashboard showcasing small actions, 100 actions across the cities, telling the story of how it's helping state climate goals. (They were not aware of the Step4/5 metrics dashboard)

- If GreenStep requires more steps or actions, make sure elected officials know that there is an increased effort by staff; city council doesn't know how the steps work and what's involved.
- Council is always asking "what are other cities doing". Annually ask cities questions or have a survey about what their annual budget is, number of full-time staff, trees planted; numbers of EVs in their fleet, miles of bike lanes, how many cities a climate action plan (year and a link to the plan), etc.; this will allow comparisons
- Nice to update the dashboard, for each city, public facing, B3 building map example; custom GreenStep page
- More navigable website.
- Tiered LMC award – city size matters. Create tiered awards based on city size; or Step 1-3 recognition specifically.