

Using SEQR to Get to Sustainability

The SEQR process begins with a project sponsor filling out either a short or a full Environmental Assessment Form, depending on the nature of the proposal. The many questions on the EAFs are intended to help Planning Boards, Zoning Boards, Town and Village Boards, City Councils, and citizens weigh the environmental impacts of proposed actions.

The key word is “environmental”. The State of New York understands the term broadly and makes sure questions on the revised EAFs consider pedestrian and bicycle accommodations, view sheds, energy demands, community character, and other issues that extend the term environmental beyond the natural to the built and social worlds.

The SEQR process provides a fairly good framework for local governments to make a balanced review of impacts, but it doesn’t necessarily require them to make a balanced final decision on whether or not to allow an action to advance. Sometimes a single factor—tax revenues, jobs, or service provision, for example—trumps all others in a local SEQR decision.

Essentially, SEQR is geared to avoiding or managing the negative. If a bad thing is prevented from happening at least partially, then SEQR can be declared a success.

Sustainability, on the hand, is designed to promote the positive by achieving a balance of environmental, social, and economic outcomes.

SEQR

Many proposed construction projects and governmental policies in New York State must undergo a process of State Environmental Quality Review before they can be approved, permitted, or adopted. Even though it’s called “State” EQR, it’s actually the responsibility of local governments to review local actions. Local governments, with the participation of citizens, review the impact on the environment of such activities as building a road or a housing subdivision, erecting a cell tower or wind turbine, adopting a comprehensive plan, amending a zoning ordinance, disturbing a wetland, or subdividing land.

Sustainability

Our region, like the rest of the world, now incorporates the idea of sustainability into decision making. This means that certain economic opportunities are no longer pursued. For example, we no longer dump untreated waste into our waterways, and we limit what we put into our landfills. Sustainability is not about halting progress, but it demands that we take a deep breath and think hard about whether a particular development or action improves the total quality of our lives, both now and in the future. Economically, environmentally, and socially we are better for this kind of reasoning.

SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability is generally understood as considering economic prosperity, environmental protection, and social advancement, not in isolation, but together, and minimizing tradeoffs between them.

It sounds fuzzy, and it is—until we begin to apply it to specific projects or specific population groups or specific issues, such as a multi-use trail or roadway, children or the elderly, and energy or transportation.

Consider a development that renders a 50 percent energy savings, is designed so that residents have the option to walk or bike, provides a more attractive space from community and services perspectives, and is affordable to many different groups. Or consider agricultural processes that shorten supply chains, have smaller environmental impacts, provide security and equality for farmers and farm workers, place a premium on the humane treatment of animals, and prioritize community health and vitality.

Net benefits can be demonstrated for all aspects of sustainability: economic, environmental, and social, the so-called “triple bottom line”.

This kind of decision making is taking hold throughout the country. It’s through such innovative thinking that communities become leaders in sustainable development.

The following graphic is from the New York State-funded, locally-produced Finger Lakes Regional Sustainability Plan. It shows how the three areas remain separate—as is probably necessary for many aspects of life and government—but that there are important areas of overlap which need to be found and explored. The Plan implicitly recognizes that while there are many economic opportunities, not all of them are environmentally or socially responsible. There are, in other words, tensions between economic, environmental, and social goals, and any steps forward require some tradeoffs.

When we decide to resolve them by finding mutual benefit, then we are thinking sustainably.



SEQR TO SUSTAINABILITY: PROCESS

SEQR is a risk-weighted assessment of various options. Sustainability begins with this kind of assessment but then seeks mutually supportive benefits with minimal trade offs.

By asking the following questions throughout the SEQR process, we can review proposed actions through a sustainability perspective:

- Will any economic gains (i.e., employment, taxes, housing) allow us to enhance our capacity for environmental protection (i.e., fewer energy demands, reductions in waste, more agricultural land, more public open space, and so on)?
- Do those who generate pollution, waste, and undesirable outcomes bear the cost of containment, abatement, or avoidance?
- Does the project or policy recognize the critical importance of a sense of place and history (buildings, streetscapes, landscapes, viewsheds, local culture)?

- Is there an equitable distribution of public resources, such as air, water, open space, and infrastructure, so that these resources are shared and available to all?
- Does development, particularly development related to non-renewable resource extraction, provide net social, environmental, and economic benefits for future generations as well as for us?
- Does the development risk serious or irreversible damage to environmental, economic, or social capital? Is lack of full scientific knowledge being used as a reason for assuming such a risk?
- Can the development be adapted to something else that the community needs in the event of unanticipated and unwelcome surprises?

SEQR TO SUSTAINABILITY: RESPONSIBILITIES

The SEQR process is one of shared responsibilities between the developer who proposes a project (often on behalf of a commercial business), the community which reviews the project and has to live with it, and the local government which makes a final decision.

The Finger Lakes Regional Sustainability Plan is nearly 300 pages long. It includes guiding principles, goals, strategies, sub-strategies, indicators, targets, and representative projects. It's worthwhile reading—it's a guide to a more prosperous economy, healthier environment, and better quality of life for everyone in the region and their children and grandchildren—but it's a lot to digest.

Ultimately, it all comes down to expectations and responsibilities: what is expected of whom, and who is responsible for what. Reviewing the roles, expectations, and responsibilities implicit in the Plan provides a path from SEQR to sustainability:

Local governments may choose to view SEQR as an administrative burden, unfunded mandate, and barrier to development... *or...* as a powerful tool to take a community to a higher social, economic, and environmental plane.

Government

- Demonstrate leadership through balanced decision making and good governance.
- Develop policy and regulatory frameworks that support sustainability, following full community debate.
- Promote examples of sustainability in practice, beginning with governmental practices.
- Provide incentives for sustainable practices.
- Look for ways to build capacity within and outside government. Recognize that good ideas can spring from anywhere. Forge partnerships.
- Provide for (independent) performance evaluation and pursue triple bottom line public reporting.

Community

- Look for opportunities to volunteer in sustainability-oriented community activities. Pursue leadership opportunities.
- Recognize the need for behavioral change by all members of society. Sustainability ultimately depends on the cumulative impact of our many, small, daily decisions.

- Respond positively to good practice guidance.
- Be an ethical voice for sustainability. Insist that we leave our community better than we found it.
- Participate in building a community for people of all ages and abilities in the place where you live.

Business

- Commit to sustainability as a fundamental and indispensable part of doing business.
- Follow best-practice sustainable industry standards.
- Encourage professional groups to pursue a leadership role regarding sustainability in their business sectors.
- Consider socially responsible investment.
- Consider business interests together with community interests.

SUMMARY

The SEQR process helps communities in New York State anticipate the consequences of development- and policy-related actions. Many important questions are asked in order to sort through conflicting interests and needs.

SEQR is a powerful tool for avoiding bad outcomes, but it is underutilized by communities to simultaneously shape the environment they face.

The leap from SEQR to sustainability requires all major participants—community, business/ developers, and government—to recognize their roles and responsibilities in creating a sustainable future, and to evaluate SEQR actions through a sustainability perspective.

REFERENCES

SEQR: Environmental Impact Assessment in New York State
<http://www.dec.ny.gov/permits/357.html>

Finger Lakes Regional Sustainability Plan
<http://sustainable-fingerlakes.org/>

ABOUT GTC

The Genesee Transportation Council guides transportation decision making in the Genesee-Finger Lakes Region of New York State, which includes Genesee, Livingston, Monroe, Ontario, Orleans, Seneca, Wayne, Wyoming, and Yates Counties.

By federal law, every urbanized area of the country with over 50,000 people must have a formal planning organization for transportation. The Genesee Transportation Council fills that role in our region. GTC is authorized to conduct transportation planning and oversee transportation investment.



The Genesee Transportation Council assures that no person shall, on the grounds of race, color, national origin, disability, age, gender, or income status, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be otherwise subjected to discrimination under any program or activity. GTC further assures every effort will be made to ensure nondiscrimination in all of its programs activities, whether those programs and activities are federally funded or not.