



March 14, 2023

Office of Mayor Paul TenHaken  
224 W. Ninth St.  
Sioux Falls, SD 57117

Dear Mayor TenHaken,

We, the undersigned Sioux Falls organizations, wish to express our deep concern over recent actions by your office and other members of City leadership to sideline a collaborative public process to draft the Sustainable Sioux Falls Plan (SSFP). The replacement by your office of a committee-approved draft sustainability plan with a new draft “framework” removed all meaningful, concrete goals and accountability measures, undermining a monthslong, consensus-driven effort by City and community representatives.

The lack of transparency surrounding these actions and the apparent violation of public trust are highly concerning. **We therefore urge you to reinstate the original draft Sustainable Sioux Falls Plan that contained consensus language from the Sustainability Steering Committee. We also call upon the Mayor’s Office to publicly release all input that went into the drafting of the latest iteration of the plan in order to maximize transparency surrounding the decision-making process.**

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Since March 2022, a 30-member Sustainability Steering Committee of community representatives from affordable housing, environmental organizations, the healthcare sector, education, academia, businesses, electric and gas utilities, and the homebuilding industry had been collaborating on a revised Sustainable Sioux Falls Plan. Despite approaching from a diverse range of personal and political perspectives, these committee members came together in good faith to find common ground. With the great leadership of the Sioux Falls Office of Sustainability in conducting extensive public engagement, the Committee worked to collaboratively draft a plan that reflected community voices and priorities.

In December, the Committee achieved consensus on an actionable and realistic implementation plan consisting of 71 actions to be taken by both the City government and community members, organizations, and businesses. These actions would have meaningfully reduced climate change and air pollution emissions while addressing issues important to Sioux Falls residents, including water quality, transportation access, and energy costs.

On February 23, the Steering Committee was informed that the consensus plan had been replaced by the Mayor’s Office with a draft “framework” which eliminated a third of the committee’s proposed actions and weakened the remaining language to remove all deadlines, concrete actions, and accountability measures, instead emphasizing “assessing,” “evaluating,” and “considering” the “feasibility” of “potential” actions. The new draft also removed all mentions of words such as “climate change” and “greenhouse gas.”

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In a March 2 meeting of the full Sustainability Steering Committee, Jenna Harris, your policy advisor, confirmed that the new language was designed to remove all “definitives” and “hard goals,” focusing on conducting studies and “avoiding hard deadlines.” Ms. Harris stated that the decision to shift to the new framework reflected input from “people” and “the public,” without providing examples or evidence of such input.

**We are deeply concerned that this “framework” will obscure and delay real action on challenges that are impacting our communities today. We believe that a “plan” which allows the City to hide behind vague platitudes while achieving no meaningful action is ultimately worse than no plan at all.**

**As concerning, however, is the undermining of good-faith, community-driven efforts as well as the lack of transparency surrounding the origins of the new draft.** The decision to weaken the Sustainability Steering Committee’s agreed-upon language took place behind closed doors, without any evidence that it was driven by public input. In the face of this lack of information, we are concerned about what may have led the Mayor’s Office to de-prioritize safeguarding the current and future livability and well-being of our community.

**We therefore urge the Mayor’s Office to immediately restore the Sustainability Steering Committee’s consensus draft plan and release all public input that went into the drafting of the “sustainability framework” in order to maximize transparency.**

**The general public of Sioux Falls care about sustainability and want to see our city move in a more sustainable direction.** A [2021 survey](#) found that 88% of Sioux Falls residents were either “concerned” or “very concerned” about sustainability and environmental issues, and that 92% thought it was “important” or “very important” for Sioux Falls to address sustainability and environmental issues. The [Yale Program on Climate Change Communication](#), one of the leading studies of climate change opinions in the United States, found that 73% of Minnehaha County residents accept that global warming is happening and 55% believe that local officials should be doing more to address climate change.

**The time for “considering” and “evaluating” is over, and the time to act is now.** The business case for more sustainable models of development is well-established, both in general and specific to Sioux Falls.. An economic analysis performed by consultants for the Steering Committee of certain aspects of their draft plan revealed that these actions were cost-effective and would have resulted in energy cost savings of 23.4% for Sioux Falls residents. Economic analyses for the City of Sioux Falls’s original [2012 Sustainability Master Plan](#) also established a favorable business case. Nationwide, the balance sheet has shifted even more in favor of sustainable technologies, as efficient and renewable energy technologies have scaled up and become in many cases cheaper than traditional technologies, and new federal incentives make these technologies even more affordable and accessible.



**Other cities have already blazed the trail; Sioux Falls must follow their example.** We do not have to look far for cities similar to Sioux Falls that have stepped up with commitments and solid goals to address the reality of climate change and other sustainability challenges. [Des Moines, IA](#), [Rochester, MN](#), [Missoula, MT](#), [Grand Rapids, MI](#), and [Ft. Collins, CO](#) have all taken actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and transition to a sustainable future. The City of Sioux Falls aims to be a leader for our region, but with this new “sustainability framework,” signals hesitancy to even follow at a distance.

In your [2026 Plan](#), you pledged to “map the course through consensus and transparency to sustainably grow and cultivate Sioux Falls.” In your Mayor’s Address at the December 8th Big Sioux River & Sustainability Summit, you stressed the need for City leadership on sustainability issues like energy conservation, green infrastructure, and active transportation. You recognized that sustainability is a top priority for young people and its importance for attracting and retaining young people in our city. You said that “We need to be able to talk about responsible stewardship of our resources” despite the “politicization” of these issues. **We urge you not to give into those forces of politicization, division, and self-interest, but to take on the mantle of leadership to safeguard a sustainable environment for current and future generations.**

Respectfully,

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*Co-Founder and Chair, SoDak 350*

Frank James  
*Director, Dakota Rural Action*

Arlene Brandt-Jenson  
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