

# KEEPING THE BLUEGRASS GREEN

It's more than an attitude.  
Action is required.

BY BENJAMIN HOAK

The color green is in. From cornfields to urban jungles, the green movement is sweeping across America. You can't turn on the television or pick up a publication without a politician, celebrity or activist urging all citizens to "go green" and save the environment.

But it's not as easy as flipping a switch (although turning off lights does help). Going green is more than an attitude. For any lasting change to occur, people must act. And while federal and state regulations often spur improvements, committed local communities across the country are vaulting ahead of the federal government by taking specific action. This includes some in Kentucky.

## ROLE OF CITIES

Cities are a vitally important cog in the mechanism of environmental protection. While many regulations originate at the federal and state levels, cities are often responsible for implementing the policies. "They have obligations just like other entities, industry or individuals would have," said Bruce Scott, commissioner of the Kentucky Department for Environmental Protection.

Authority flows from federal laws enacted by Congress (and enforced by the Environmental Protection Agency, or EPA) through the state level down to local ordinances. "Sixty-five percent of what we do is driven by the federal Clean Air Act," said Art Williams, director of the Air Pollution Control District in Louisville. "Our

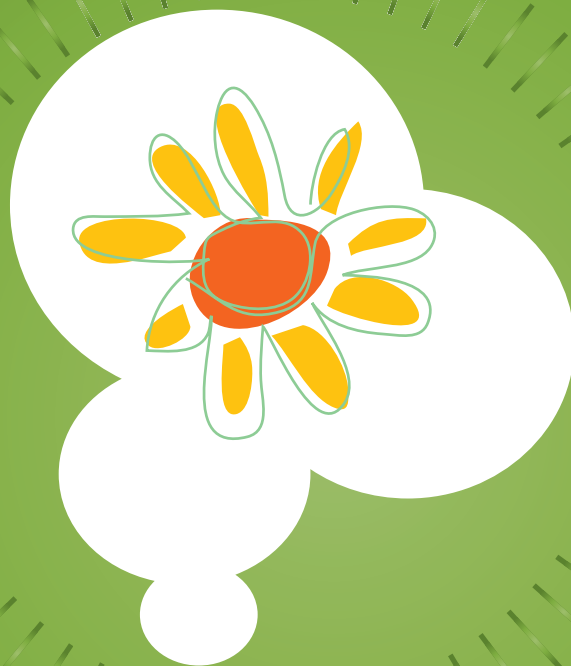
local government agency exists pursuant to state law. If we didn't exist, the state would have to do much of what's done at the local level."

In addition, some cities mandate programs that are not federal requirements.

While Louisville is the only city in Kentucky that implements its own air program, all cities have to work closely with businesses and individuals to ensure they comply with regulations. "A lot of developments go through cities," said Raymond Sanders, superintendent of the wastewater collection department for the city of Madisonville. "(We) have to work one-on-one with developers."

"We have the most direct impact on water and waste," said Cheryl Taylor, environmental quality commissioner

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for Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government. “We’re right at the point of operation. Fundamental requirements are based on state laws, then local regulations.”

City government provides more than proper enforcement to its citizens. When done well, it should offer leadership and inspiration. “It’s critical for cities to be involved (in environmental issues),” said Lelan Hancock, facilities maintenance manager for the city of Owensboro. “When you get into smaller cities, individuals look to (the) city as the hub of the community. When the city takes the initiative ... that sets the stage for individuals to follow.”

“Most people look to the cities – ‘What are you going to do next?’” Madisonville’s Sanders noted.

## water

Kentucky cities are responsible for protecting three main areas of the environment: water, air and land.

Wastewater and storm water cause some of the largest issues Kentucky

faces. Seventeen communities across the state are under legal agreements with federal and state government – known as consent decrees – requiring them to address sewer and storm water problems.

“We’re estimating (it will take) \$2.5 billion in wastewater infrastructure ... constructed over the next five to 15 years to comply with those orders,” Scott said. “It’s an enormous investment for communities.”

Lexington alone is under a consent decree from the EPA to develop a storm water system that will probably cost around \$300 million, Taylor said.

Most cities in Kentucky were developed with combined storm and wastewater systems. As cities grow in concentric circles, adding more homes and businesses, outdated systems cannot handle the volume of water. Then, when it rains, raw wastewater and storm water spill into streets and creeks; Taylor said Lexington has 110 recurring overflows each year.

## air

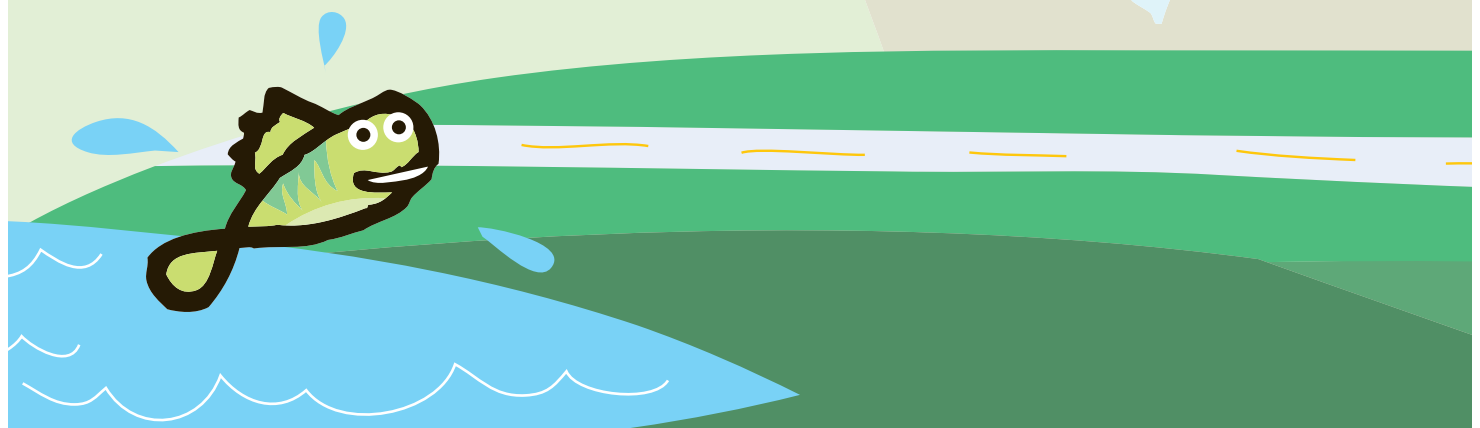
Much of the media attention surrounding environmentalism has to do with the air we breathe – how much pollution is in it, what level of greenhouse gas is being emitted, and how much is the climate actually changing. Williams estimated that about 40 percent of his Louisville agency’s time is spent on ozone and particulate issues, with about 10 percent spent on climate change.

Six mayors in Kentucky have signed the U.S. Conference of Mayors Climate Protection Agreement, which calls for each participating city to reduce its global warming pollution to at least 7 percent below 1990 levels by 2012. More than 500 mayors in the 50 states have signed the agreement; the six Kentucky cities represented are Bowling Green, Frankfort, Lexington, Louisville, Owensboro and Villa Hills.

The agreement does not hold cities accountable, but Cass Harris in the Mayor’s Office of Environmental



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Policy in Louisville said Mayor Jerry Abramson is fully committed to the agreement. The city is pursuing all 12 suggested target areas, including inventory and reduction of global warming emissions, increasing use of alternative energy and promoting cleaner transportation options. Specific goals include reducing energy use by 10 percent and fuel consumption by 5 percent by 2010.

## LAND

Cities must also make good use of their land resources. Waste management and landfill policies contribute heavily in this area, as citizens and businesses must know what they can and cannot do – dumping used oil in sewers, backyards or creeks, for example, is not only bad for the environment, it's illegal. The state is making progress. According to the Division of Waste Management, open dumping has declined 77 percent since 2000. And in 2006, *sustainlane.com* named Louisville's solid waste management program the

ninth best in the country.

One of the best ways cities can make use of their limited land is through careful community planning. Redeveloping businesses or land (often through brownfield reclamation or blighted areas) squares perfectly with the concept of sustainability; it makes good use of existing resources and keeps cities from gobbling up even more of their limited green space.

Louisville's Waterfront Park, for example, is a former brownfield site that now includes 85 acres of green space, brings a million and a half people downtown each year and, in 2006, was named one of the top 10 urban parks in the nation by the Urban Land Institute.

Agricultural pollution doesn't get as much publicity as urban pollution, but its effects can also be harmful. Sediment from agricultural and development activities in rural areas impairs water quality by smothering the bottom of stream beds and causing organisms to die, which in turn has

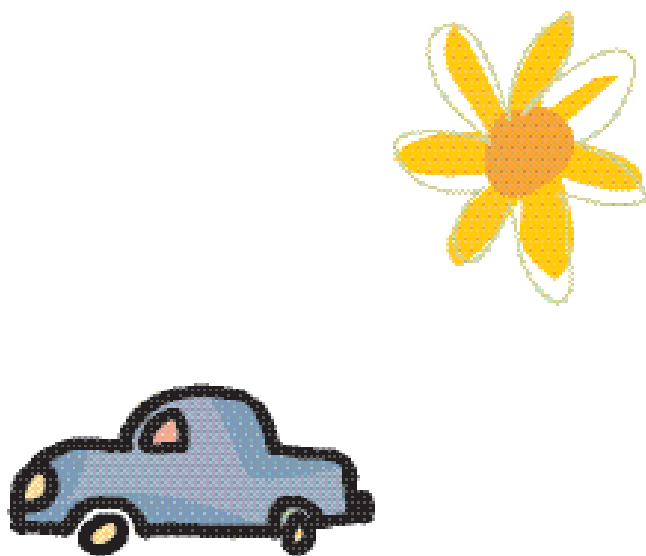
a negative impact on higher level species.

Scott said grass filter strips placed between the edges of plowed fields and streams can prevent sediment from creeping into streams. Farmers must also use best management practices to keep fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides from affecting the environment in a significant way.

## How Have Kentucky Cities Responded?

Given the huge challenges in dealing with these and hundreds of other smaller environmental issues, what can cities do?

Plenty, as it turns out. Kentucky's two largest cities have earned national recognition for their efforts; in February of this year, *Popular Science* ranked Lexington 25th on its list of the top 50 green cities in the country;





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Louisville ranked 42nd.

Among other initiatives, both cities have developed green partnerships with some of their largest employers – city/county government, public school systems and state universities – to take advantage of the combined economies of scale, resources and knowledge for the benefit of the environment.

Instead of three separate bids for recycled content copy paper, for example, Louisville's Partnership for a Green City put in one bid for 450,000 reams in 2005. All three employers then used the paper. Harris said Metro Louisville alone saved \$30,000 through the bulk purchase.

The federal EPA has put together a green city partnerships guide based primarily on the organizations in Louisville and Lexington (the Bluegrass Partnership for a Green Community).

Louisville has also launched an Internet portal for environmental education ([www.louisvilleky.gov/gogreen](http://www.louisvilleky.gov/gogreen)) and is a priority partner of Energy Star. That means officials are creating a public/private partnership to promote energy efficiency in buildings throughout the city.

Lexington has recently reorganized

its department of environmental quality to better focus on issues such as greenhouse gas reduction and an energy-saving strategy for the entire city. Taylor said Mayor Jim Newberry sends her ideas daily about how to save energy and protect the environment.

In response to Mayor Tom Watson's signing of the U.S. Conference of Mayors Climate Protection Agreement, Owensboro has created a climate action committee to determine where the city stands in regard to global warming emissions, with an action plan to follow. The city also recently acquired its first hybrid vehicle; Hancock said the city's hybrid fleet could expand to include hybrid garbage and mail trucks, depending on how much the car actually saves.

"We don't only try to be good stewards of the environment, but (also of) taxpayers' dollars," he said. "We try to make improvements continually. It's less reactionary and more evolutionary change as we go along."

Owensboro has also been a





Tree City USA for 17 years – the designation means a city follows a specific forestry program for the benefit of the environment. In Owensboro's case, every tree in the city is mapped through a GPS inventory. If a tree goes down for any reason, the city plants another to replace it. (Lexington has been a Tree City USA for 19 years; Anchorage for 18 years.)

Madisonville, a city of just under 20,000 people, recently joined KY EXCEL, a leadership program created by the Kentucky Department for Environmental Protection to encourage individuals, businesses and organizations to create voluntary projects that improve the environment by reducing their environmental footprint. Lexington is the only other city in the program, although several state agencies and numerous businesses have joined.

Other environmental initiatives under way across Kentucky include anti-litter programs, permeable concrete (preventing water runoff), rain gardens, solar power, biking and pedestrian plans, compact fluorescent

and LED lights, smart sensors that regulate thermostats, smoking bans, a rebate program for people who trade in a gas-powered lawnmower for an electric one, and numerous recycling programs. Kentuckians recycled 27 percent of common household recyclables in 2006, an increase of 5 percent over 2005. (See the accompanying "How green is your city?" for more about what Kentucky cities are doing.)

## BENEFITS

It might not be obvious, but actions such as these can have a considerable economic impact.

"Economic development is a pretty significant factor in the realm of sustainability," Harris said. Cool Corridors of Opportunity in Louisville help to "revitalize less desirable areas for business or retail locations. It's the whole principle of sustainability – use what you have, reuse, don't neglect it."

"Environmental focus allows us to grow the economy in Lexington," Taylor said. "If we don't do a good

job, we can fail in both." She cited Portland, Ore., (No. 1 in *Popular Science's* ranking of green cities) as a dynamic, environmentally conscious city whose innovative green thinking draws young, upscale crowds. Cafes and shopping are integrated into neighborhoods, the air and water quality is excellent, half the city's power comes from renewable resources, and a quarter of the population commutes by bike, carpool or public transportation.


"People want to live in a city like Portland," she said.

For Kentucky cities to reach that point, they'll have to encourage residents to follow the maxim of thinking globally and acting locally. "As society becomes more aware of issues, they will drive improvement more than my agency," state environmental commissioner Scott said. "That's where communities come into play. They say, 'We have policies, we'll enforce that.' They become drivers of it."

"Everybody looks at government for the answers," Hancock said, but "it's everybody's duty. We should all be good stewards of the environment. We're asking everybody to get on board."

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## ON THE WEB

Visit [www.popsoci.com/environment](http://www.popsoci.com/environment) for *Popular Science's* list of the 50 greenest cities in the United States and case studies of how six communities have gone about the process. 

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