

The city of Kent and Kent State University now share a sustainability coordinator to help them implement their sustainability plans. Pictured (center): Julie Morris, sustainability coordinator, stands between her two supervisors. At left, Bridget Susel, community development director for the city of Kent; at right, Melanie Knowles, sustainability manager for Kent State University.



Working together toward a more sustainable future

This year, the city of Kent announced a climate action plan to reduce the city's greenhouse gas emissions and address other environmental concerns.

After the detailed plan was crafted, city officials realized something was missing. The plan includes transitioning municipal lighting to energy-efficient LEDs and laying the groundwork for an electric vehicle infrastructure. But someone needs to shepherd the initiative from idea to application. Kent could not afford to hire someone full time, says Bridget Susel, the city's community development director, so it turned to Kent State University for help.

Kent City Manager Dave Ruller, who has worked with three Kent State University presidents to invest in Kent's renaissance, asked if Kent State would share a sustainability coordinator. And the university agreed. (The position is equally funded via city ordinance and the university's facilities planning and operations budget. The university supplies employee benefits.)

"The city and the university have engaged with each other around sustainability issues for years," says Melanie Knowles, Kent State's sustainability manager. It's an important partnership, she says, because they share a target audience: students, faculty and staff who also reside in Kent. Plus, the university is working on its own sustainability plan.

So, Julie Morris became the city and university's sustainability coordinator as of March 1, 2023.

Morris says she became impassioned about environmental issues at Sonoma State University.

There she was introduced to "the long and storied histories of the environmental movement, and also to the pressing issues that a warming planet would have across environmental, economic and social sectors if left unchecked," she says. "I knew then that I wanted to be a part of helping create solutions and resilience in the face of these wicked problems."

In 2016, she graduated with a master's degree in sustainability from the Falk School of Sustainability and Environment at Chatham University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. That year she was appointed to a three-year term on the city of Kent's Sustainability Commission, where she served as a volunteer until 2019. During her tenure, she helped strengthen community relationships and guide policies for the development of a city-wide climate action plan. When it came time to fill the sustainability coordinator role this year, Morris was an obvious choice, Susel says.

The city of Kent still must formally adopt the climate action plan and the university still must approve its sustainability plan. However, Morris has already been hard at work, splitting her time evenly between the city and the university. She looks forward to executing the plans soon.

"I am excited to help bring the initiatives outlined in the city of Kent's climate action plan and Kent State's sustainability plan to life," Morris says. "I love collaborative work, and it will be wonderful to get to connect with all the folks who are already doing great work in our communities around the areas of action the plans call for. I look forward to working together to implement the suggested initiatives." ⚡

—Jillian Kramer, BA '06