

For EPA personnel and partners who wish to implement collaborative problem solving projects effectively.

Sustainable Environment for Quality of Life (SEQL)

Successful Multi-Party Organization Works to Resolve Environmental Concerns from Explosive Growth in the Carolinas

Background

Elected officials from across the Charlotte, NC – Rock Hill, SC region, along with the states of North Carolina and South Carolina, EPA, and others, have developed an initiative called Sustainable Environment for Quality of Life (SEQL). Conceived in 2000, the initiative is designed to promote a healthy environment, a strong economy, and a high quality of life for the citizens of the 15-county Charlotte, NC - Rock Hill, SC region.

Sprawl, air quality and water quality problems, and increases in vehicle miles traveled are just a few of the concerns that face the greater Charlotte/Gastonia/Rock Hill region. Because the region is a highly desirable place to live—with a growing population of 2.1 million people—SEQL's approach is to address the region's challenges, including the following:

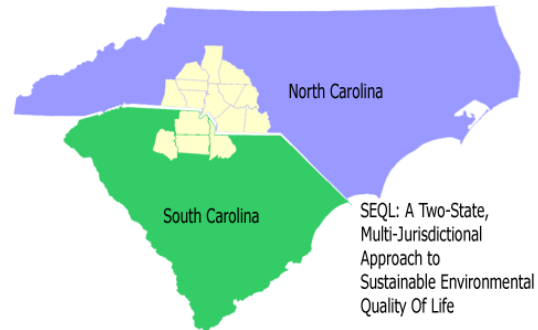
- Offering local governments the opportunity to work with each other to garner cooperation and collaboration—setting a standard for the nation.
- Providing implementation assistance to local governments on environmental “commitment action items”; and
- Analyzing ozone air quality issues while also addressing transportation, water, land use, energy use, and economic development.

This project is designed to support the region's efforts to develop integrated, long-range plans to ensure economic development and a positive quality of life for its future. The project is a cooperative undertaking of local elected officials and is managed by the Centralina and Catawba Council of Governments (COGs). The region has demonstrated that planning, developed through an EPA grant, can provide an integrated strategy that other local governments across the country could use to address similar quality of life and environmental issues.

What made SEQL Successful

The Charlotte metropolitan region has seen the impacts of unbridled growth in the neighboring metropolitan area of Atlanta. Charlotte's experience demonstrates that rapid growth is a powerful catalyst for cooperation to address economic development and environmental impacts.

SEQL was started in the spring of 2001 as the EPA Sustainability Project with a \$100K grant from EPA to bring together the region's elected officials to learn about air quality, water resources and land use issues. The group developed and recommended an initial list of 25 “tool box actions” relating to air, water and land use measures for implementation across the region.



SEQL pulls together diverse groups into facilitated discussions aimed at regional problem-solving and policy formulation. By involving these groups early, to enable regional consensus on policies, SEQL facilitates decision-making by governmental boards and reduces cross-jurisdictional conflict.

SEQL participants have identified the following factors as contributing to its success:

- Focus on regional and multi-jurisdictional impacts.
- Showcase local and regional successes that benefit many diversified business sectors.
- Include non-traditional stakeholders.
- Strong, supportive political leadership.
- Strong, steady institutional support and leadership from the COGs.
- Reliable funding from EPA, COGs and elsewhere.
- Provide menu of options from which local governments can choose actions to improve environment and quality of life.

The SEQL process has enabled us to share what we are doing to create a more environmentally sustainable community and has also helped us to learn from others in the region.

- Scott Padgett, Mayor, Concord, NC

What Makes SEQL Unique

SEQL represents a model of regional cooperation where over 60 local governments across an area the size of Connecticut have joined to work together on a common set of concerns. SEQL is bi-state where the Centralina and Catawba COGs serve counties in North and South Carolina respectively. Further, SEQL focuses on ways to fully integrate air quality issues into transportation, land use and economic development efforts. The Charlotte region is one of the first regions in the country to work with EPA in this manner.

Lessons Learned

SEQL participants have identified the following lessons learned:

- Get buy-in from local elected officials and find ways to continually keep them engaged.
- Work through an organization that is respected across the region (like COGs in Charlotte).
- Encourage both small and large jurisdictions to participate.
- Get local groups involved from different sectors.
- Local elected officials will take course of action generally favorable for the environment if they have: education/information; public and peer support; and a clear sense of multiple benefits.
- Focus on “interest” rather than “position.”

EPA has identified the following lessons learned:

- Inform all participants - let people decide what they want to do.
- Communicate reasonable expectations for project results.

- Demonstrate long-term EPA commitment.
- Ensure adequate project resources.
- Follow the adage, “Defining success depends on where you sit.”
- Identify local key driver for project.

Results

SEQL is implementing measures to address the environmental impact of the rapid growth that the Charlotte region is experiencing and continues to experience. These measures provide local leaders with options to promote air quality, clean water and sustainable growth. To evaluate future growth scenarios, SEQL is utilizing EPA's state-of-the-art program called “ReVA” (Regional Vulnerability Assessment). The scenarios will incorporate the various environmental and quality of life issues of concern to the region.

SEQL's progress includes the following:

- Over 700 actions implemented by over 80 jurisdictions.
- Four new county-level air quality stakeholders groups formed.
- Three counties are sponsoring “integrated planning roundtables.”
- Clean School Bus funding in two counties.
- Teacher training programs (Air and Waste Management Association curriculum) held in two counties to date, with over 70 teachers trained.

Keys to Collaboration Exemplified

Six keys for collaborative problem solving are demonstrated through SEQL. Because the Charlotte region is a highly desirable area to live, the impacts of unbridled growth represent the **shared problem** that leaders within the region wished to avoid as they

improved quality of life.

To address the problem, Charlotte Mayor Patrick McCrory, and Mecklenburg County Commission Chair Parks Helms, were the **conveners of stature** for SEQL, and they kicked off the collaboration with a \$100K grant for bringing together the region's elected officials. The **committed leaders** in this cooperative undertaking were the Centralina and Catawba Regional Councils of Government. In addition to the Councils of Government, the **representatives of substance** included the states of North Carolina and South Carolina, EPA, and other organizations.

With input from all of these individual organizations, SEQL's **clearly-defined purpose** was based on promoting a healthy environment, a strong economy, and a high quality of life for the citizens of the 15-county Charlotte, NC-Rock Hill, SC region. SEQL advances the objective of a **common information base** through integrated long-range plans, integrated planning roundtables, and a regional GIS Framework.

For More Information

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