What is needed to grow a local and regional Green Economy (GE) that brings good jobs with good wages, benefits, and secure careers?

- There is a need for greater recognition and institutionalization of government efforts that can green economies. Government has the ability to influence sustainability agendas across public and private sectors, as well as strengthen the area’s culture of sustainability. Through internal integration of sustainability, in particular, approaches across departments, the city, and the county, can promote a holistic strategy for municipal services and thereby make incremental, long-term improvements toward greener infrastructures.

- Strong government leadership is needed to grow a GE, as well as a public culture where sustainable thinking, innovation, and practices are the norm, not the exception. Spending nearly $600 million a year, the City government alone has a large purchasing power that can drive green jobs growth and promote sustainability goals.

- Consistent funding streams are needed that support sustainability efforts. This requires a long-term mindset, holistic approach, and balance between small, incremental steps and larger leaps toward a GE.

What current strategies address these needs?

- Although lacking a clear definition, for terms like “green economy” and “sustainability,” there is a growing sense across sectors that these concepts include the interconnection of three pillars: economic viability, environmental responsibility, and social equity. Although not everyone working within the GE address all three at all times, there is a growing understanding that sustainability means more than just having environmental benefits; there’s a fuller picture we’re working toward.

- Governments are starting to fund permanent sustainability director positions, moving away from dependence on terms of office or political affiliations. This demonstrates a longer-term approach to sustainability across regional governments.

- Grants are being leveraged/combined to build partnerships and enhance sustainability. Although this does not solve funding challenges, it enables a broader reach for sustainability work.

Assets- what other current activity can be leveraged to support specific strategies in place?

- The City has a strong sustainability agenda and is on the lookout for additional ways to support GE initiatives.

- Although cities in our region approach sustainability differently, they are aligned in some key ways, particularly through development-based goals that align green projects with taxpayer savings and networks like the Urban Sustainability Directors Network and the
Southeast Sustainability Directors Network. As collaboration through such networks increases, governments can share grant opportunities, best practices, and lessons learned.

- Public-private partnerships and other funding opportunities are available to cities to get additional support outside of their own budgets. Although short-term and inconsistent funding presents challenges, it provides stepping-stones for future sustainability work.

Obstacles- what keeps these assets from being more successfully pursued at this time?

- The role of Sustainability Director is complex, somewhat experimental, especially in the Southeast, and varies in scope and practice depending on locale. There is not a “one-size-fits-all” model. Because of demands of the job, there is a high turnover rate, making long-term goals hard to realize.

- Overall, there is a lack of qualitative and quantitative data on social and economic challenges to guide sustainability efforts. Without documented and quantifiable data, it is difficult to make a strong case for funding needs or measures of effectiveness tied to funding requirements and opportunities.

- Although government sustainability activities rely heavily on partnerships with niche organizations or activist groups focused on particular aspects of the GE, it is challenging to work with them because they are sometimes unwilling to compromise or consider other driving priorities (outside of their narrow goals) for a collaborative project. This impedes progress, creates tension, and builds frustration. Competing priorities abound among partners and conflicts of interest can present real challenges. For example, energy efficiency is a higher priority for energy producers, but for energy distributors efficiency might take a back seat to delivery concerns.

What are some suggested strategies?

- Governments can benefit from more people working with a systems-thinking mindset, specifically to communicate, organize, and synthesize information from specialists across the GE. With so many different stakeholders, it would be helpful to operate in a way that identified stakeholder strengths, and then utilized those strengths by assigning tasks that require them for grant or other opportunities.

- Governments could collaborate more on sustainability plans, strategies, and public awareness campaigns. They could, for example, work together on regional agriculture initiatives that feed into GE development. They could share costs and benefits of gathering data that could guide their sustainability priorities.

- Develop language around GE concepts and sustainability that is locale-appropriate and resonates with citizens. This language could incorporate messages about the ways greening the economy translates into taxpayer savings (i.e., literally and in broader senses, such as more livable cities, preservation of resources, higher wages, etc.)

Action priorities- what to do and in what order? Stay tuned for the breakout session.