

Eco Network Panel Focuses on the Upside

The urgent global need to solve the complex urban challenges brought on by population growth and a changing climate can seem overwhelming and unmanageable.

But listen to Dutch landscape architect and academic Nico Tillie, an executive with the World Council on City Data, and difficult problems start to sound elegant, inspiring – even fun.

Tillie was one of three panelists to present creative ways Charlotte and cities around the globe are tackling air quality and other sustainability challenges at Envision Charlotte's second Eco Network Speakers Series event September 19.

Tillie's presentation discussed completed projects and eco-concepts in the making. Among the highlights: "greenway trains" and squares for rain. Part of the so-called Low Countries, The Netherlands has made mitigating climate change's worst impacts a priority, and with leadership has come innovation.

One impressive example, the Benthemplein Water Square, was recently completed in Rotterdam. The first facility of its kind globally, the project serves as a local catchment for half a million gallons of stormwater with every rainfall, significantly reducing the burden on the whole city's wastewater system. When dry, the squares become public spaces for sports and recreation (above right).



Getting around has an element of unexpected whimsy, too. The Delft Central Railway Station offers parking for more than 5,000 bikes, while commuter trains throughout the country glide across canopies of grass (below right). A combination of social pressure and accommodating policies has made cycling the preferred mode of transit for more than a third of Dutch people, while transit's share is about 10 percent.

According to Tillie, in the (not so) distant future, communities across the Netherlands will turn parking lots into public parks, and grow 21st Century "Garden Cities," not with buildings but with plants. The main idea, he suggested, is that planning for a low-carbon future can be linked to planning for a more liveable, equitable city.

Brian Collier, Executive Vice President of the Foundation for the Carolinas, and the evening's second speaker, agreed. The recent release of Charlotte's Opportunity Task Force report, which Collier had a key hand in producing, has elevated economic mobility and inclusion as key issues



for civic leaders to address. Environmental quality, Collier noted, should be lifted up as an issue of equity, fairness and respect.

The final panelist, Mecklenburg County air quality director Leslie Rhodes, continued the theme of public mindedness as she discussed regional effort to maintain compliance with federal air quality standards.

One notable project involved curbing a key source of emissions, off-road vehicles, by awarding grants to help equipment owners retire their older, dirtier vehicles in exchange for less-polluting alternatives. The program has reduced 653 tons of ozone-forming pollution in the Charlotte region.

Rhodes also said more and better data has increased the local agency's capacity to drive change. Trends show the region is improving – doubling the number of “good” ozone days in the past dozen years – even as total vehicles and miles driven continue to increase.

For more discussion on the ideas and innovations that will propel a sustainable future, join Envision Charlotte for the next Eco Network event in early 2018.