

Promoting Environmental Sustainability Initiatives: The Role of a Chamber of Commerce

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Introduction:

For years environmental sustainability and economic development have been positioned in direct conflict. It was believed that environmental interes

development. Chambers are comprised of community members who are engaged in trade, industry, or public services and hope to profit from a working relationship with their government by directing chamber and government policy as a single voice, and by receiving valuable governmental information (Pilgram & Meyer 1995). With the support of a chamber of

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to push for local policies that help bring about subsidies, tax incentives, and new regulatory standards for business. Additionally, the Chamber of Commerce can take initiatives to keep money, and the exchange of dollars, as local as possible.

Along with improved economic conditions, the Chamber of Commerce also has the power to encourage and foster sustainable practices, which improve environmental quality. Environmentally related initiatives have the potential to decrease energy costs, thereby fostering economic stability and sustainability in Saratoga (Pennock 2011; Jacomit et al. 2009). Implementing environmental strategies in Saratoga will also mitigate environmental and human health hazards that are often associated with highly developed areas (EPA 2001). Environmental initiatives can abate habitat and ecosystem degradation, improve air and water quality, lessen risk of toxin contamination, and work toward curbing global climate change. The implementation of environmentally sustainable practices would also be effective in both decreasing greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution, and in reducing issues regarding water quality and quantity in the area. Studies show that environmentally minded practices can substantially reduce the amount of storm runoff, help communities conserve water, and direct management toward an already existing infrastructure (Van Lare 2006). A decrease in storm water runoff would be advantageous to the Saratoga community and would likely have an overall reduction in the amount of sediments and pollutants entering the watershed (epa.gov). By providing incentives for reduction in energy use, the Saratoga County Chamber can also promote practices and developmental strategies that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and air pollutants (smartgrowthamerica.org; Iams et al 2006). Additionally, sustainable development can encourage land use practices, which reduce pollution and waste (Burchell et al. 2000).

An environmentally conscious Saratoga would thus add to the prominence that already

resounds within the county. If Saratoga's Chamber of Commerce were to become more involved in promoting environmentally sustainable practices by enacting environmentally related strategies that permeate many levels of business, the city could see a surge in consumerism, tourism, development, and economic growth while preserving the unique culture and history that define the region.

This project assesses the role that chambers of commerce play in promoting sustainable development and economic growth for its affiliates. This information will be coupled with an analysis of the current role of Saratoga County's Chamber of Commerce and will also explore areas for future progress in the Chamber's role for promoting economic growth and environmental sustainability. This research will provide recommendations for the Chamber of Commerce and for Saratoga County to move forward with environmental practices that promote economic stability.

Methods:

Our methods were a threefold process. We began by contacting and interviewing twenty chambers of commerce located throughout the nation (Appendix A). Representative chambers of commerce were contacted based on recommendations from professionals in the sustainable development industry and from Chambers For Innovation--an existing network of chambers that are working towards environmental sustainability in their communities (chambersforinnovation.com). Efforts were made to speak with chambers whose size and area of influence is comparable to that of the Saratoga Chamber of Commerce. In certain instances, when this goal could not be maintained, the discrepancy in size between the interviewed chamber and Saratoga Chamber of Commerce was both noted and accounted for in the interpretation of results. Therefore, while there was some inconsistency in the size of the chambers interviewed, our interviews still provided valuable information on the potential avenues by which the Saratoga County Chamber of Commerce can address environmental sustainability.

Next, we conducted interviews with representative members of the Chamber of Commerce to determine how the members view the role of the Chamber of Commerce, their opinion on the effectiveness of environmental strategies already in place, what type of environmental initiatives they would like to see in Saratoga, and how they would like to see the Chamber move toward implementing more sustainable practices. The contacts chosen were based on the potential leadership roles their businesses play in the community both economically and environmentally. In addition, businesses were contacted from each of the following sectors so that a wide range of interests could be surveyed: construction, energy, food, manufacturing, raw goods, and tourism.

Using the information gained from these conversations, we structured a short survey that was sent out to the over 3,000 Chamber of Commerce members via a Chamber online newsletter (Appendix B). Due to limited initial responses, we sent out an additional 100 emails to randomly selected chamber members. This survey expanded on the themes that were uncovered during the conversations with other Chambers of Commerce and key Saratoga County Chamber members. The survey results were used to determine the main environmental strategies that stakeholders view as viable and necessary for maintaining an economically and environmentally sustainable county, and how the Saratoga County Chamber of Commerce could best promote these strategies. With this information, we narrowed the focus of our study to several environmentally related initiatives that we hope will be implemented in Saratoga.

Results:

Part I: Chamber of Commerce Interviews

In order to carry out informed interviews and make realistic recommendations to the Saratoga Chamber of Commerce, we first needed to gain a better understanding of the actions

members, in light of differing circumstances and goals.

Partnerships

Another avenue by which chambers are addressing issues of sustainability is with the aid of politically informed individuals or bodies. This is an important area to address because there are inherent political barriers in accomplishing any sort of significant environmental change within an area. This may be related to a myriad of issues such as zoning, energy, or climate legislation. Having informed bodies in contact with chambers allows chambers to provide their members with essential data for advancing sustainability-based initiatives. For example the Cambridge, Massachusetts Chamber works with the local government to coordinate development and facilitate communication between the chamber and other large area stakeholders such as MIT and Harvard. This is significant for several reasons. By bringing together politicians, large academic instc3 0 0 0.24 72 405.36cm BT 50 0 0 50 0 0 Tm /TT3.0 1 Tf [(a) t(c) 0.2 (i) 0.2 (ns) -0.2 (t) 0.2 (c

Hole, Wyoming chamber. The Jackson Hole Chamber of Commerce works with Sustainable Travel International (STI), an organization that promotes tourism to environmentally responsible destinations. STI helped Jackson Hole form an alliance with a sister city in Canada as a means of motivating local business to adopt more sustainable practices in each area. This city partnership encourages businesses in both areas to become involved in environmentally related initiatives, while also drawing environmentally minded tourists from around the world to the area. To further promote its economy, while still having a mind toward environmentalism, the Jackson Hole Chamber of Commerce joined the Geo-tourism Stewardship Council, a program run by National Geographic that supports tourism to destinations that have a commitment to sustaining

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Central Florida Partnership is not technically part of the Orlando Chamber, the two groups communicate and work together to address the goals outlined by the Central Florida Partnership.

The previously mentioned examples are all avenues of how chambers across the country are currently addressing issues of environmental sustainability in their area. In each example, chambers of commerce have been able to promote environmental initiatives in the public sphere by improving services and increasing transparency.

Part II: Interviews with Representative Saratoga County Chamber of Commerce Members

To gain an understanding of how Saratoga's business owners viewed the connection between economic sustainability and environmentally related initiatives, we conducted a series of interviews with key members of the Saratoga County Chamber of Commerce. From the construction sector, we spoke with both a small and a large firm. The smaller firm employs approximately 3 to 4 people, and deals predominantly in environmentally sustainable architecture in Saratoga County and surrounding regions. The larger firm employs approximately 20 people and deals in commercial, industrial, and general construction.

In the energy sector, we spoke with an energy purchasing company that works with chambers to facilitate group energy buying for chamber members and municipalities.

Additionally, we spoke to an alternative energy conservation firm that seeks to provide energy reduction through efficient generation and conservation. Both businesses are small in size, employing fewer than five workers.

With regard to food-related businesses, we contacted both a medium and large sized businesses. The medium sized business has 23 employees, and maintains that its mission is to

provide the community with natural and organic products to nurture the overall health of the community.

Information obtained on the raw goods sector was gathered from speaking with a small

Each of the Chamber members that we interviewed expressed that their reason for joining the Chamber of Commerce was to partner with an organization that will help promote their business interests in the community. Opening doors of opportunity for growth and development and networking were cited as the main themes among responses, yet other members explained that they thought a partnership with the Chamber could improve quality of life and the overall viability of the Saratoga community.

In general, the Chamber of Commerce members that we spoke with were aware that an effort to work toward environmental sustainability in Saratoga could benefit both their businesses' viability as well as the community's social and economic sustainability. Our contact from the natural foods business commented that there should be a "balance between economic growth and ruining what makes the town really nice." Other Chamber members that we spoke with from various sectors, both environmental and non, made note that many Saratogian business owners and residents appreciate having a higher quality of life, and they are looking at environmentally-related initiatives as a way to achieve that. Some of the Chamber members with whom we spoke were already incorporating environmentally-

that could formulate plans for environmentalism that fit in with a particular business's economic

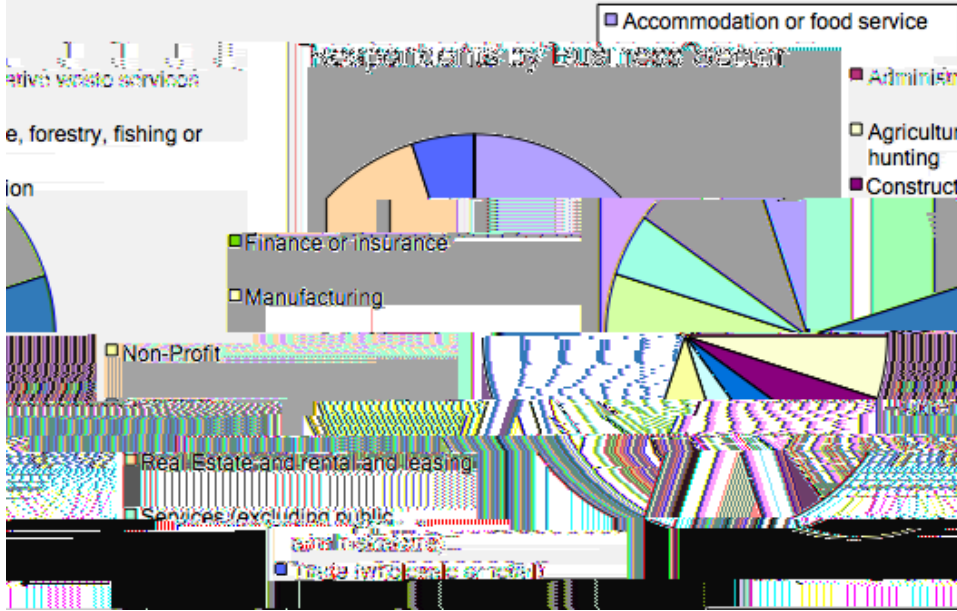


Figure 3: Respondents by Business Sector, Reported by members of the Saratoga County Chamber of Commerce

Next, we wanted to know how involved and interested Saratoga businesses were in environmentally related initiatives. Approximately 76% of respondents said that they consider the economic sustainability of their business to be positively linked with environmentally related

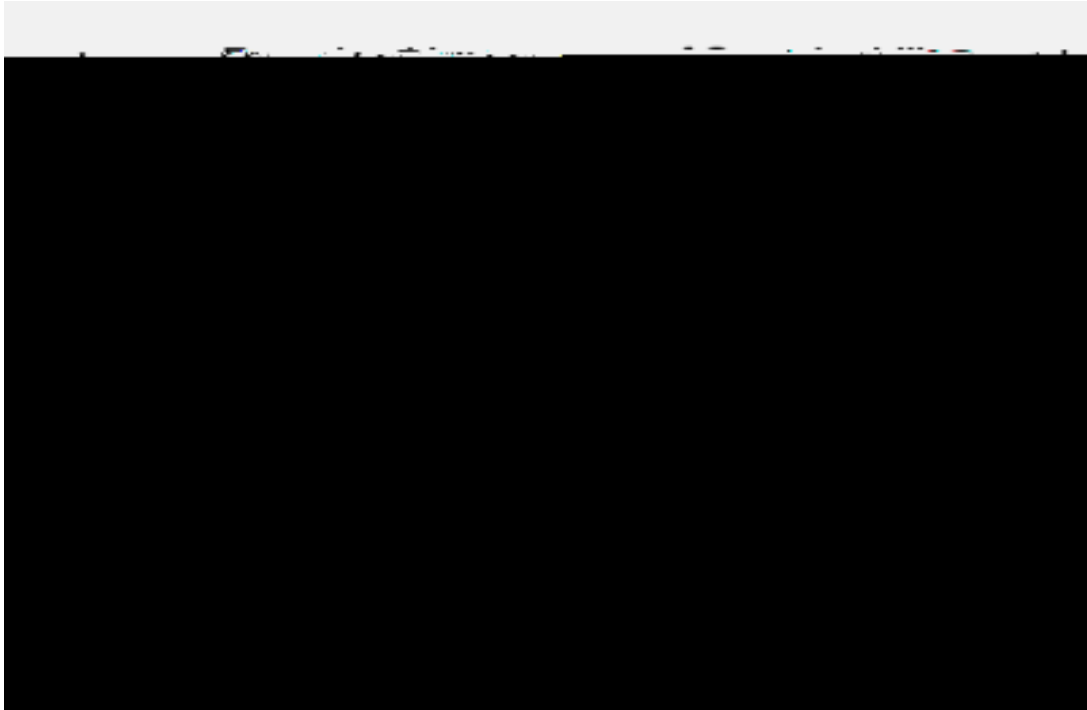


Figure 4: Perceived Importance of Sustainability in Business Models, Reported by members of the Saratoga County Chamber of Commerce

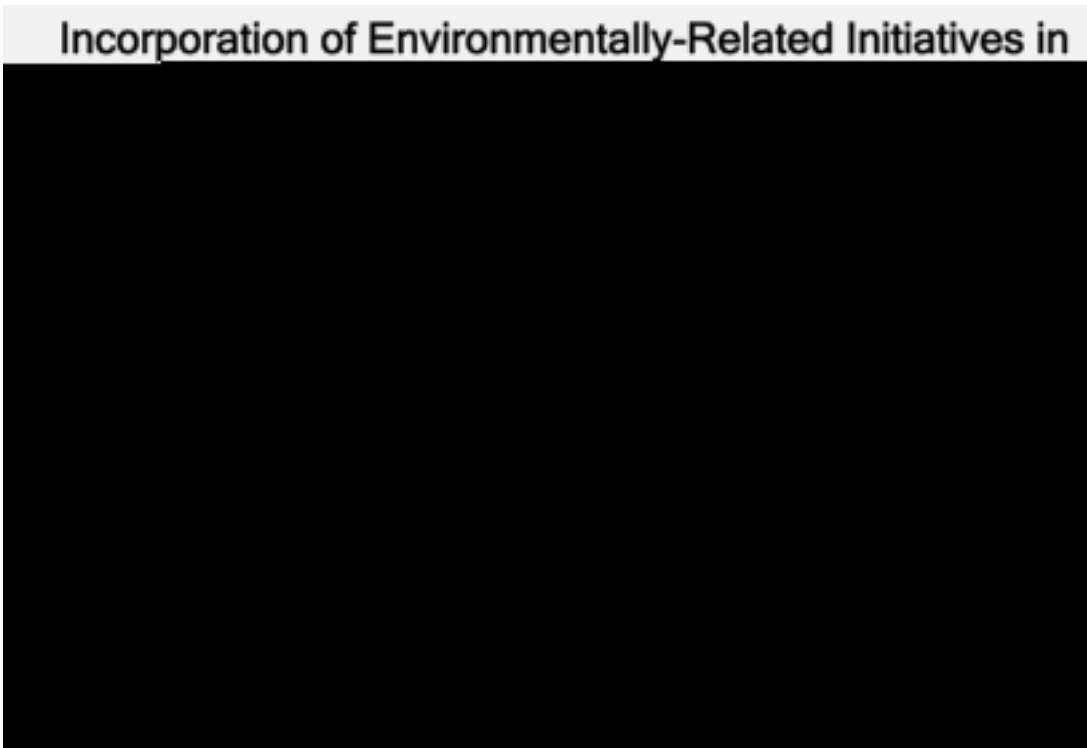


Figure 5: Incorporation of Environmentally-Related Initiatives in Business Models, Reported by members of the Saratoga County Chamber of Commerce

Our final set of questions focused on how to best encourage more environmental responsibility in Saratoga. We found that the majority of respondents noted that initiatives that would be beneficial to their business included renewable energy, recycling, energy audits, and composting (Figure 6). However, 10.5% of respondents answered that no environmentally related initiatives or services would be beneficial to their business. We were also interested in how best the Chamber of Commerce could support environmentally related initiatives in Saratoga, of which the most popular responses included facilitating conferences and dialogue and partnering with existing bodies that are already working toward environmental sustainability. On the other hand, one respondent noted that the best way the Chamber could support environmental initiatives was to ban mandated environmental programs all together, and another added to his response that environmental initiatives would neither help nor hurt their business.

When asked whether they would like to learn more about environmentally related initiatives that could be incorporated into their business models, 61.9% of chamber members said yes, and some respondents specified areas of interest, which included alternative energy and recycling. When prompted, several respondents also had ideas about localized environmentally related initiatives that the Saratoga County Chamber of Commerce could sponsor to improve the economic vitality and livability of the region. Suggestions included adapting city streetlights to lessen light pollution, adopting alternative energy sources, increasing recycling programs, protecting and conserving open spaces like parks, waterfronts, and farmland, improving and expanding public transportation, and closing narrow downtown streets to cars, making them accessible to pedestrians only. One anonymous respondent made the claim that “if we have ‘Meatless Mondays

Conversely, one respondent explained that he would rather the Chamber not focus on promoting environmentally related initiatives at all, emphasizing the point that while the majority of respondents were in favor of environmental initiatives there are some who were not.

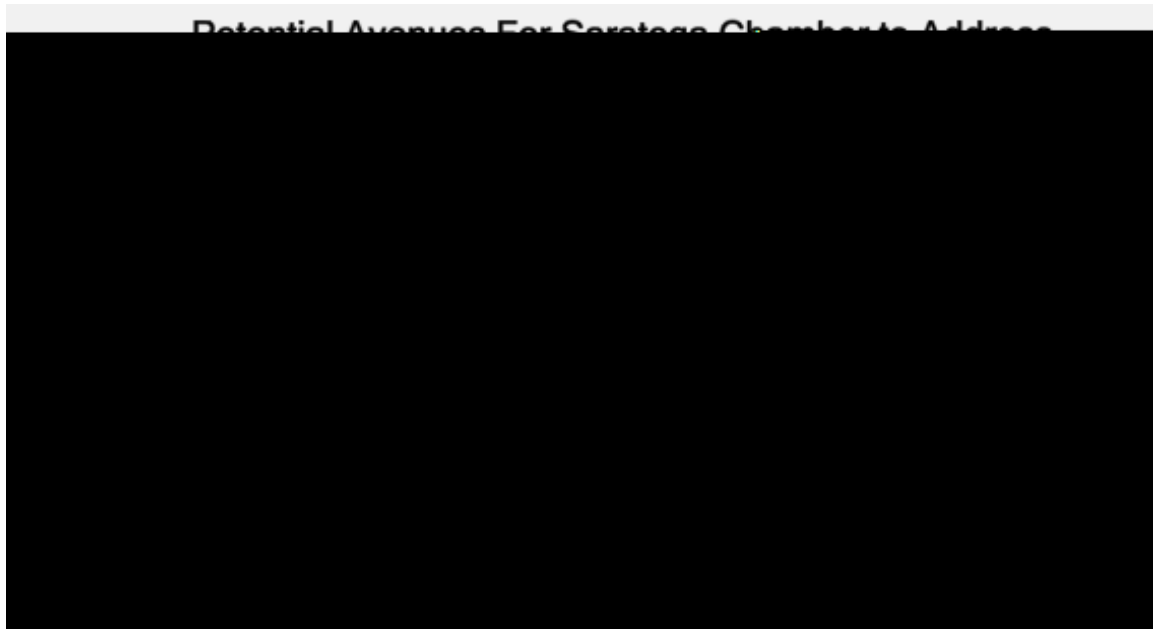


Figure 6: Potential Avenues for Saratoga Chamber to Address Sustainability, Reported by members of the Saratoga County Chamber of Commerce

interpretations of what has been most successful in other areas, as well as what we see as attainable for Saratoga based on our findings. Therefore, while we trust that these measures could improve the economic and environmental conditions of Saratoga County, they do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Saratoga County Chamber of Commerce.

Green Business Network:

Based on our research we believe that the Saratoga Chamber of Commerce should make strides to facilitate, create, and promote a green business network. As previously mentioned, there is not a universal definition for the limitations of what constitutes a green business network. That being said, they generally tend to be a network of businesses that have been evaluated and certified as having a commitment to addressing issues of environmental sustainability on several different levels such as but not restricted to: reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, locally sourced materials for production, recycling, use of renewable energy, education outreach, conservation of water resources, and lower waste stream.

This conclusion is informed by the findings in all three methods of our data collection and is reflected in Figures 1, 4, 5, and 6. Figure 1 demonstrates that the majority of our respondents (86%) have been in business for 5 or more years. This is important because the success of a green business network is ultimately dependent on the longevity of the businesses that comprise it. In essence, you cannot have a business network if there are no long-term businesses. Figures 4, 5, and 6 complement Figure 1 by showing the support the surveyed members have for environmentally minded initiatives, such as a green business network. Figure 4 demonstrates that the 76.2% of respondents perceive environmentally sustainable initiatives as important to their business model while Figure 5 shows that 80.1% of respondents already

incorporated some environmentally related initiatives into their business models. Lastly, Figure 6 shows that half of the survey respondents see a green business network as a potential avenue for the Chamber to address sustainability.

These survey results are supported by both our Saratoga Chamber member interviews, as well as our interviews with several chambers located throughout the nation. In our interviews with chamber members, half of the members supported the idea that a green business network would be beneficial to the Saratoga County Chamber of commerce. This sentiment was shared by both small and large businesses from a variety of sectors—giving reason to believe that despite having a small sample size, our results may be indicative of consensus within the chamber community. As discussed in our results section, we also heard from several chambers that have successfully implemented a green business network. In our discussions with these chambers, they shared with us the important role their green business networks have had in identifying and branding the more environmentally active chamber members (refer to results section for chambers with successful green business networks). With all of these findings in mind, we believe there is evidence to suggest that a green business network for Saratoga County is not only desirable but would also be well utilized.

Partnerships

The continued work on the part of the chamber to maintain and expand relationships with firms and bodies already addressing environmental sustainability is another route for the chamber to examine environmental concerns within Saratoga County. While the Saratoga Chamber is already doing this in some capacity, we believe there could be more reliance on these prevailing environmental voices in the community.

This notion is well represented in the results of our survey and interviews. As evidenced by the aforementioned importance of Figures 1, 4, and 5, we believe there is reason to believe that a wide range of chamber members see environmental initiatives as beneficial. This is best seen in Figure 6 which shows that 71.4% of survey respondents see partnerships with existing bodies already working towards sustainability as a viable way for the Saratoga Chamber to address issues of environmental sustainability. Our chamber interviews back up this finding.

In all of our chamber interviews, every chamber that was successfully responding to environmental concerns was in some fashion utilizing and relying on exterior bodies to forward initiatives. This was most apparent in the utilization of institutions of higher education, with Fayetteville, Chapel Hill, and Berkeley each relying on state universities for support in design and implementation of their green business networks.

The Saratoga County Chamber of Commerce could expand their ability to tackle environmental issues by partnering with more groups already invested in environmental issues. For example, while Saratoga does not have any large higher education institutions, there are smaller institutions such as Empire State College, Adirondack Community College, and Skidmore College. Utilizing the various groups of people at these types of institutions, including both students and faculty, proved successful at other chambers and would likely yield similar results for Saratoga. These institutions could help in conducting valuable research, providing interns, and educating chamber members on certain environmental issues.

There are also several groups outside of academia that could provide important services to the Saratoga County Chamber. Organizations such as Sustainable Saratoga, Saratoga Healthy Transportation Network, and Cool Cities are all contributing positively to the environmental concerns in the area. By working with these groups the Chamber of Commerce can bring all

interested parties together and potentially expedite traditional means of interaction and communication while streamlining environmental initiatives already underway.

Steering Committee

The third approach we see as attainable for the Saratoga Chamber of Commerce is to establish a steering committee. While this was not a common tool used by the chambers in our interviews, we believe it to be the natural progression of the aforementioned strategies. By establishing a green business network and increasing relationships with existing bodies the Chamber of Commerce has the ability to create a sub-group of members who have already expressed interest in these issues. A successful example of this is the Orlando Regional Chamber of Commerce and its work to establish the Central Florida Partnership (see results).

This group, which was comprised of area stakeholders and leading businesses, effectively serves as an arm for the area to

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Appendix A

Chambers Contacted:

Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce, NC

Beaufort Regional Chamber of Commerce, SC

Berkeley Chamber of Commerce, CA

Brattleboro Area Chamber of Commerce, VT

Cambridge Chamber of Commerce, MA

Appendix B

Saratoga Chamber of Commerce Sustainability Survey

1. How many years has your business been in operation?
 - a. Less than 1 year
 - b. 1 to 3 years
 - c. 3 to 5 years
 - d. More than 5 years
2. How many workers does your business employ?
 - a. 1 to 5
 - b. 6 to 10
 - c. 11 to 20
 - d. 21 to 50
 - e. 50+
3. Which of the following industry descriptions best fits your organization?
4. Do you think that environmentally-related initiatives can be beneficial to your business's economic prosperity?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Not Sure
5. Do you incorporate environmentally-related initiatives into your business model?
 - a. Yes
 - b. NoIf YES please specify
6. What type of environmentally-related initiatives of services would be beneficial to your business?
 - a. Renewable energy
 - b. Improved public transportation
 - c. Educational programs
 - d. Recycling
 - e. Composting
 - f. None
 - g. Other (please specify)
7. Would your business like to learn more about environmentally-related initiatives that could be incorporated into your business model?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No