

CITY OF BLOOMINGTON
COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABILITY

Bloomington Commission on Sustainability
2024 Annual Report

Version 2

May 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Bloomington Commission on Sustainability (BCOS) experienced a year of rebuilding and renewal in 2024. Despite challenges with commission vacancies and meeting quorum requirements, BCOS made significant strides in advancing sustainability initiatives across Bloomington. The Commission successfully awarded grants for innovative community projects, engaged with urban agriculture and waste reduction initiatives, and provided input on municipal code revisions affecting sustainability.

BCOS also expanded its collaborative approach by initiating regular work sessions, developing stronger relationships with other city commissions, and establishing an ad-hoc committee to conduct a comprehensive sustainability assessment. Notably, the Commission passed Resolution 2024-01 to affirm and clarify its unique role within the city's governance structure.

As we look toward 2025, BCOS is positioned to build on these accomplishments with a focused approach to contribute meaningfully to city policy, engaging community partners, promoting educational initiatives, and continuing to fund grassroots sustainability projects.

INTRODUCTION

The Bloomington Commission on Sustainability serves as the city's primary advisory body for advancing the sustainable socio-environmental-economic well-being for all Bloomington residents. Established in 2005, BCOS has evolved to address the increasingly complex and interconnected challenges of climate change, social equity, and economic resilience.

The Commission's mandate, as outlined in Bloomington Municipal Code (BMC) §2.12.100, includes advising the City Administration on sustainability and resilience issues, recommending policy changes, facilitating community education, and coordinating with other governmental and non-governmental organizations. In 2024, BCOS focused on strengthening its operational foundation, fostering collaborative relationships, and supporting community-based sustainability initiatives through targeted grant programs.

This annual report documents the Commission's activities, accomplishments, and challenges during 2024, while outlining strategic priorities for the coming year. Our work reflects a holistic approach to sustainability that integrates environmental protection, social equity, and economic vitality—recognizing that true sustainability requires balance among all three domains.

COMMISSION OVERVIEW

Commission Composition and Membership

BCOS is composed of 14 members as defined in BMC §2.12.100: Five seats appointed by the Bloomington Common Council, six seats appointed by the Office of the Mayor, and three ex-officio seats held by designees of the Monroe County Commissioners, the Bloomington Common Council, and the IU Office of Sustainability. Four members are annually elected by the Commission to fill four executive offices: Chair, Vice Chair, Secretary, and Treasurer. The Commission also has a staff liaison from the Department of Economic & Sustainable Development (Figure 1).

BCOS experienced significant membership transitions throughout 2024, which affected the Commission's ability to maintain quorum and conduct business at times. The Commission elected new leadership in May 2024, with Justin Vasel serving as Chair, Andrew Guenther as Vice Chair, and Matt Austin as Treasurer. The Secretary position remained unfilled until August when Zero Rose was elected to the role. Shawn Miya served as BCOS Staff Liaison throughout the year.

New commissioners joining BCOS in 2024 included Andrew Guenther, Jami Scholl, Zero Rose, Tara Dunderdale, Evan Nix, Hunter Hawley, and Quentin Gilly (representing IU's Office of Sustainability). The Commission bid farewell to Kate-Lyn Edwards, who announced her departure in May 2024.

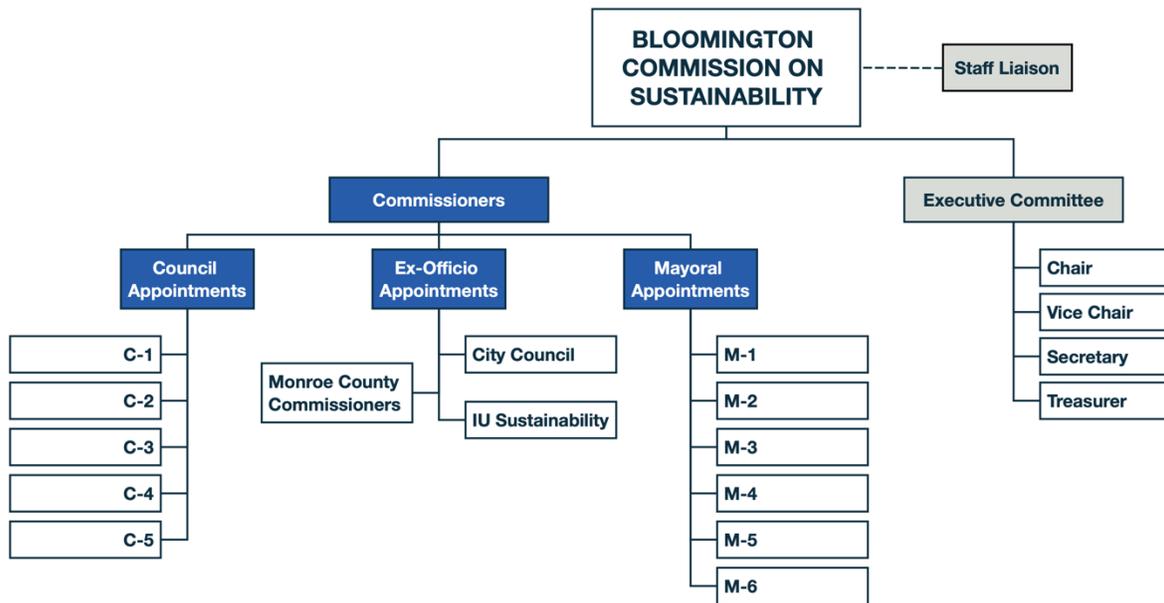


Figure 1. Structure of the Bloomington Commission on Sustainability.

Meetings and Attendance

BCOS held nine regular meetings during 2024, with scheduled meetings in April and July canceled due to anticipated lack of quorum and the State of the City event. The Commission struggled with quorum issues early in the year, particularly during the March meeting when incorrect guidance about counting ex-officio members and vacancies initially led to a misunderstanding about whether quorum had been achieved.

In September 2024, BCOS initiated a new approach to increasing productivity by introducing work sessions separate from regular business meetings. These work sessions, held at the Monroe County Public Library, provided an informal setting for commissioners to collaboratively advance projects without the time constraints of regular meetings. Two work sessions were conducted in September and proved valuable for developing grant proposals and discussing strategic initiatives.

Regular business meetings were held in the McCloskey Conference Room at City Hall, with hybrid attendance options available for commissioners unable to attend in person. The Commission's meeting minutes document a gradual improvement in attendance throughout the year, with more robust participation evident in the second half of 2024.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF 2024

Grants Programs and Projects

The Commission facilitated several impactful sustainability initiatives through its grant programs in partnership with the Department of Economic and Sustainable Development (ESD).

Sustainable Neighborhoods Grant Program

This program, established in 2023, provides \$10,000 annually to support small-scale neighborhood sustainability projects, typically limited to \$1,000 per project. In 2024, BCOS oversaw the implementation of previously approved grants and approved new initiatives.

TerraCycle 1.0. A \$1,000 grant awarded to GardenQuest in late 2023 was successfully implemented throughout 2024. The project procured specialized recycling boxes from TerraCycle

to divert hard-to-recycle materials from landfills. Data collected showed that laminated paper products constituted the highest percentage of household trash diverted, followed by food wrappers. The program trained ten neighbors and collected valuable data on household waste management practices, with participants expressing strong interest in continuing and expanding the program.

TerraCycle 2.0. Building on the success of the first phase, BCOS approved a follow-on \$1,000 grant in December 2024 to test a hybrid approach comparing time-savings versus cost-savings models. The project will focus on the most popular recycling categories from phase one and continue collecting weight and volume data to assess impact. The results of this project will provide valuable insight into the popularity, accessibility, and sustainability impact of this approach to waste management. We hope that its success will serve as a springboard for wider adoption among Bloomington communities.

New Pollinator Gardens. In November 2024, the Commission approved a \$1,000 grant proposal to purchase pre-made pollinator garden kits for installation in the Grandview Hills neighborhood. The project aims to increase native pollinator habitat and provide educational resources to residents about the importance of native plants.

Working Group Grant Program

This program provides \$10,000 annually for Commission-initiated projects. After significant effort to navigate the city's approval processes, BCOS approved two important projects in late 2024 and developed a proposal for a waste redirection effort that it hopes to pursue in 2025.

CanopyBloomington Tree Planting. The Commission approved a \$4,000 Working Group grant to support CanopyBloomington's tree planting initiative, representing one of the most substantial sustainability investments BCOS made in 2024. This project will replace 16 trees in areas of Bloomington previously identified as high-need neighborhoods where tree mortality had occurred. The Commission chose to partner with CanopyBloomington, a non-profit organization dedicated to expanding and maintaining Bloomington's urban forest, based on their demonstrated expertise in tree selection, planting, and long-term care.

The proposal, championed by Commissioner Andrew Guenther, underwent extensive development with input from multiple BCOS members. It received unanimous support after careful consideration of its alignment with the city's Climate Action Plan, which identifies urban tree canopy expansion as a key climate adaptation strategy. During the extensive discussion process, the Commission emphasized the importance of selecting native species that demonstrate resilience to changing climate conditions, supporting biodiversity while ensuring the long-term survival of the investment.

A distinguishing feature of this project is its comprehensive maintenance plan. Each planting site requires a signed letter of intent from the property owner or manager committing to tree maintenance for a minimum of three years, addressing a common shortcoming in many tree planting initiatives where insufficient aftercare leads to high mortality rates. CanopyBloomington supplements these commitments with professional oversight and technical support for tree stewards.

Through this partnership, BCOS is helping to advance multiple sustainability goals simultaneously: mitigating urban heat island effects, sequestering carbon, reducing stormwater runoff, providing habitat for native species, and enhancing neighborhood aesthetics and property values. The project also demonstrates the Commission's commitment to equitable distribution of environmental benefits by focusing planting efforts in underserved areas of the city where tree canopy is often disproportionately sparse.

Cob Bench Project. The Commission approved a \$1,000 Working Group grant to support the creation of an innovative community gathering space at Redbud Books on Kirkwood Avenue, featuring benches constructed using the ancient cob building technique. Commissioners Zero Rose and Evan Nix championed this project, drawing on their expertise in sustainable building practices

and community engagement to develop a proposal that seamlessly integrates multiple sustainability principles. The project encompasses not only the construction of cob benches—made from a mixture of clay, sand, and straw—but also the installation of an arbor, bike racks, native pollinator gardens, and edible landscaping, creating a multifunctional community hub in a high-visibility downtown location.

This initiative stands out for its strong community support, with over 20 neighbors signing letters of support and more than 30 individuals volunteering to participate in the construction process. The project exemplifies BCOS's commitment to demonstrating practical sustainability solutions that engage citizens directly in implementation. By using site-sourced clay, reclaimed limestone, and other local materials, the Cob Bench Project will serve as a living educational tool for sustainable building techniques while enhancing neighborhood connectivity and providing ecological benefits through native plantings. Commissioner Nix secured partnerships with Redbud Books, which is providing a \$200 in-kind contribution, and Blue Bee Ecological Endeavors, which will donate plants, soil, and seeds.

Bokashi Composting Initiative. The Commission's Waste Management Working Group, led by Commissioner Matt Austin, developed a comprehensive proposal for a \$5,000 project to establish a Bokashi composting training and implementation program across Bloomington. This innovative initiative emerged from extensive community needs assessment and collaboration with multiple local organizations including Garden Quest, the Lotus Festival, Purdue Extension, and the Waste Reduction District of Monroe County (WRDMC). The proposal exemplifies BCOS's commitment to addressing food waste—a significant contributor to landfill emissions and a key concern identified in the Climate Action Plan. The Commission has structured the project as a public-private partnership, successfully securing matching funds of \$5,000 from WRDMC, effectively doubling the initiative's impact and demonstrating the Commission's skill in leveraging limited resources.

The Bokashi method offers distinct advantages over traditional composting, particularly for urban settings, as it uses an anaerobic fermentation process that can safely process all food waste—including meat, dairy, and oily foods typically excluded from conventional composting. Commissioner Austin highlighted that this approach is especially valuable for apartment dwellers and those with limited outdoor space, making it an equity-focused solution that expands composting access beyond homeowners with yards. The project design incorporates both practical implementation and educational components, with plans to establish a "Compost Captains" volunteer training program modeled after successful initiatives in other communities. While final approval of this ambitious proposal remained pending at year's end due to administrative processing requirements, the groundwork laid in 2024 positions this initiative for immediate implementation in early 2025, with potential to significantly reduce landfill waste while building valuable soil resources for community gardens.

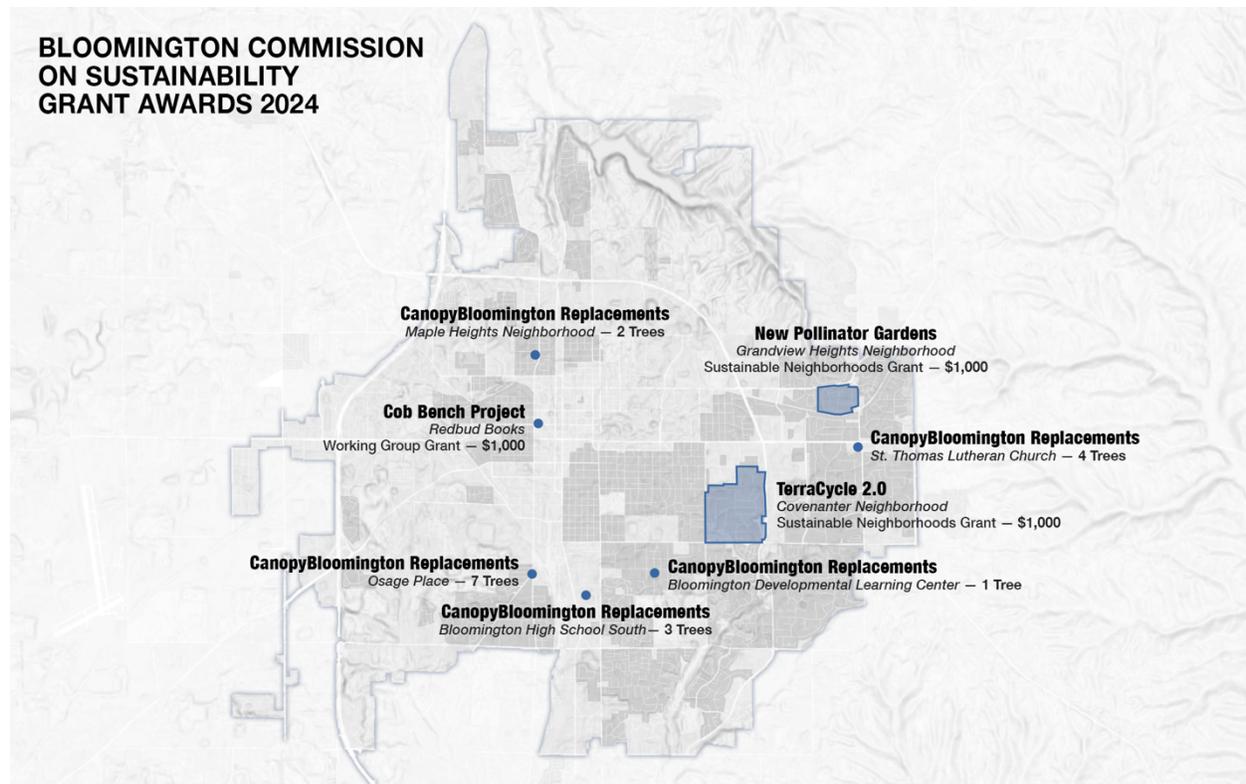


Figure 2. Geographical distribution of BCOS-approved projects funded by Sustainable Neighborhood Grants and BCOS Working Group Grants.

Policy Development and Municipal Code Engagement

BCOS actively participated in discussions about its own role within city governance and provided input on sustainability-related policies throughout 2024. The Commission engaged meaningfully with proposed changes to the Bloomington Municipal Code, particularly as they related to the Commission's purpose, structure, and responsibilities.

In the wake of the 2022 Novak Report, which recommended potentially merging BCOS with the Environmental Commission, BCOS devoted significant attention to clarifying its unique identity and value within the city's governance framework. This included detailed discussions spanning multiple meetings about the Commission's integration of environmental, social, and economic aspects of sustainability—a holistic approach distinguishing BCOS from other advisory bodies.

Resolution 2024-01. In December 2024, the Commission unanimously passed its first formal resolution of the year, expressing support for proposed changes to BMC §2.12.100 with specific recommendations to maintain the Commission's broad advisory role to the City Administration and incorporate resilience into the Commission's purview

Knowledge Building and Assessment

BCOS took significant steps to enhance its understanding of sustainability challenges and measure progress toward city climate goals.

Sustainability Assessment Ad-Hoc Committee. In September 2024, the Commission established an ad-hoc committee to conduct a comprehensive sustainability assessment. After surveying commissioners to prioritize focus areas, the committee began developing a framework to evaluate the city's progress on climate action goals, focusing initially on energy and the built environment, green space and ecosystems, and local food and agriculture.

Educational Presentations. The Commission hosted informative presentations throughout the year, including a detailed overview of the Summit Development project on Bloomington's southwest side, examining its sustainability features and potential impacts on housing, transportation, and natural resources. The Commission intends to continue seeking informational presentations to maintain awareness of current topics that touch on sustainability in Bloomington.

Engagement and Collaboration

BCOS strengthened relationships with other commissions and community organizations.

Cross-Commission Coordination. Commissioners began attending meetings of the Environmental Commission, Commission on Hispanic and Latino Affairs, and other city boards to identify opportunities for collaboration and reduce duplication of efforts.

Strategic Engagement Planning. The Commission developed a formal engagement strategy with three primary objectives: identifying related organizations, maintaining awareness of their activities, and pursuing collaboration opportunities.

FINANCIAL OVERVIEW

BCOS managed two primary funding streams in 2024, both provided through the Department of Economic and Sustainable Development (ESD):

Sustainable Neighborhoods Grant Program: \$10,000 annual allocation

- Funds committed in 2024: \$2,000 (TerraCycle 2.0; New Pollinator Gardens)
- Projects completed using prior year funding: \$1,000 (TerraCycle 1.0)

Working Group Grant Program: \$10,000 annual allocation

- Funds committed in 2024: \$5,000 (CanopyBloomington—\$4,000; Cob Bench—\$1,000)
- Additional proposals pending: \$5,000 (Bokashi Composting Initiative)

Both grant programs operate on a calendar year basis, with funds that must be encumbered by December 31. The Commission worked diligently in the latter part of 2024 to identify and approve high-impact projects to utilize available funding before year-end.

In November 2024, ESD announced that beginning in January 2025, Sustainable Neighborhoods Grants would be administered directly by ESD without requiring BCOS approval. While this change streamlines the process for applicants, the Commission expressed interest in maintaining an advisory role to ensure alignment with broader sustainability priorities.

CHALLENGES IN 2024

Commission Functionality & Productivity

The Commission faced several operational challenges that affected its efficiency and effectiveness:

Leadership Transition. BCOS operated without permanent leadership for the first four months of 2024, with Commissioner David Maenner serving as Acting Chair until elections were held in May. While Acting Chair Maenner performed commendably, this transition period limited the Commission's ability to advance strategic initiatives and maintain momentum.

Document Management. The Commission and City staff worked to find solutions for document storage and collaboration that would meet both the practical needs of commissioners and the City's legal and policy requirements, though this remained a challenging balance to achieve. This

stemmed primarily from concerns about Indiana's Open Door Law (ODL), which regulates how public bodies conduct business and maintain transparency. The City Attorney's office expressed concern that commissioners collaboratively editing documents outside of public meetings could potentially constitute a "meeting" under the ODL if a quorum of members were involved in the editing process, even asynchronously.

Despite extensive discussions with City staff and legal counsel throughout the year, a satisfactory resolution remained elusive. The Commission explored various approaches to balance efficient document collaboration with strict ODL compliance, including the creation of read-only document repositories and establishing clear protocols for sequential document editing. However, in December, the City Attorney ultimately recommended all document management occur exclusively through OnBoard rather than through shared drives created by commissioners. This solution prioritized legal compliance but created practical difficulties for collaborative work on complex documents like the Sustainability Assessment Report. This tension between administrative efficiency and legal compliance represents an ongoing challenge for the Commission's productivity that will require continued attention in 2025.

Meeting Format Limitations. Standard monthly business meetings proved insufficient for the Commission's workload, leading to truncated discussions and deferred agenda items. In response, BCOS introduced work sessions in September to provide dedicated time for more in-depth collaboration and project development.

Procedural Guidance. The Commission and staff navigated complex procedural questions throughout the year, including during the March meeting when differing interpretations of quorum calculation requirements led to uncertainty about whether official business could be conducted.

Grant Process Complexity

Administrative Hurdles. Both grant programs administered by BCOS involved multi-step approval processes requiring coordination between the Commission, ESD staff, and city financial departments. The time required to move projects from concept to implementation created challenges for timely project execution.

Funding Authority Limitations. Questions arose about the Commission's authority to seek external funding or engage in fundraising activities, with differing interpretations of the Commission's mandate creating uncertainty about potential revenue sources beyond city allocations.

Loss of Grant Oversight. In November, ESD announced that Sustainable Neighborhoods Grants would no longer require BCOS approval beginning in January 2025. While intended to streamline the process, this change raised concerns about the Commission's diminishing role in community sustainability initiatives and reduced opportunities for commissioner expertise to inform project selection.

Commission Continuity Issues

Membership Gaps. Throughout 2024, BCOS operated with vacant positions and experienced turnover in membership, creating knowledge gaps and increased workload for remaining commissioners.

Quorum Challenges. Meeting quorum requirements proved challenging at times due to the combination of vacant positions and unavoidable commissioner absences, leading to the rescheduling of planned meetings in April and July. When meetings proceeded with minimal attendance, the Commission's ability to take formal actions was limited.

Lessons Learned

The challenges faced in 2024 yielded valuable insights for future Commission operations:

Flexible Meeting Structures. The introduction of work sessions demonstrated the value of supplementing formal business meetings with more collaborative formats, allowing for deeper engagement on complex topics without the constraints of formal meeting procedures.

Strategic Focus. The experience with the Sustainability Assessment Ad-Hoc Committee highlighted the importance of prioritizing and narrowing focus areas to achieve meaningful outcomes within the Commission's limited capacity.

Advance Planning. The year-end rush to approve grant projects underscored the need for earlier identification and development of potential initiatives to allow adequate time for administrative processing.

PLAN FOR 2025

Building on the foundation established in 2024, BCOS has identified two strategic priority areas for 2025. Rather than selecting specific projects, the Commission has chosen broader thematic domains to provide strategic direction while maintaining flexibility for commissioners to pursue various initiatives within these areas.

Priority 1: Housing and Urban Agriculture

The Commission has identified housing and zoning policy as a critical area where sustainability principles can significantly impact Bloomington's development trajectory. This priority encompasses several interrelated components:

Housing Affordability and Accessibility

The Commission will engage with the social equity components of housing policy by exploring how green building practices can improve both sustainability and affordability, investigating alternative housing models such as tiny home zoning, and addressing the balance between rental properties and owner-occupied homes. The Commission will also monitor major developments like Summit District for adherence to sustainability principles.

Food Resilience & Urban Agriculture

BCOS recognizes that access to abundant, affordable, and nutritious food is critically important to the long-term economic vitality and health of our community. As climate change continues to impose increasing strain on global, national, and local food supply chains, any short-term crisis threatens to amplify those strains in unpredictable and potentially disastrous ways. While emergency management is not the purview of this Commission, vulnerability to long-term impacts from short-lived events is a sustainability issue. BCOS will investigate the current state of food security and resiliency in Bloomington through this lens to identify and recommend policy changes that help mitigate these risks through increased urban agriculture or other means.

Priority 2: Education, Outreach, and Coalition Building

Recognizing the limitations of its meeting schedule and procedural constraints, BCOS will leverage its position to amplify existing community initiatives through strategic education and partnership efforts:

Resource Amplification

The Commission will connect community members with available sustainability resources by promoting city grant programs, educating the public about BCOS Working Group Grants, and creating informative materials about sustainability initiatives and best practices.

Coalition Building

BCOS will strengthen connections with organizations already engaged in sustainability work, focusing on partnerships rather than duplicating efforts. This will include inviting organizations to present to the Commission and identifying partnership opportunities with other city commissions and boards.

Public Engagement

The Commission will increase direct interaction with community members by maintaining a presence at events such as Earth Day, developing interactive educational activities, creating surveys to gather community input on sustainability priorities, hosting practical educational events such as “fix-it clinics”, and encouraging public attendance and comment at BCOS meetings.

Implementation Strategy

To ensure effective progress on these priorities, BCOS will:

- initiate Working Group Grant processes early in the year to avoid end-of-year rushes and allow for thorough project development;
- focus attention on time-bound opportunities such as providing input on the UDO amendment process;
- track the city's implementation of the Climate Action Plan through the Sustainability Assessment Report;
- monitor budget allocations related to sustainability initiatives to ensure alignment between financial commitments and stated priorities; and
- maintain flexibility to address emerging opportunities and challenges in Bloomington's sustainability landscape.

This strategic approach will allow BCOS to maximize its impact despite limited resources, focusing on areas where the Commission can provide the greatest value to Bloomington's sustainability.

CONCLUSION

The Bloomington Commission on Sustainability demonstrated resilience and determination in 2024, overcoming operational challenges to advance important sustainability initiatives. By successfully funding innovative community projects, providing thoughtful policy input, and laying the groundwork for the first Commission-authored sustainability assessment in many years, BCOS has reinforced its value to the city's governance structure.

As Bloomington faces the intensifying challenges of climate change, resource constraints, and equity concerns, BCOS's integrative approach to sustainability—bridging environmental, social, and economic considerations—provides an essential perspective for city decision-making. The Commission enters 2025 with renewed focus, improved processes, and a commitment to measurable progress toward Bloomington's sustainability goals.

The Commission extends its appreciation to the Department of Economic and Sustainable Development staff, particularly Shawn Miya and Jolie Perry, for their dedicated support throughout the year. We also thank the community partners who collaborated on grant-funded projects and the city leadership for their continued commitment to a sustainable future for all Bloomington residents.

Finally, the Commission thanks the residents of Bloomington who attend our meetings and make their voices heard on sustainability issues that are important to them. The Commission also deeply appreciates the staff of Community Access Television Services (CATS) for recording our meetings and making them accessible for all Bloomingtonians.

APPENDIX A: 2024 MEETING SCHEDULE

Date	Meeting Type
January 9, 2024	Regular Meeting
February 13, 2024	Regular Meeting
March 12, 2024	Regular Meeting <i>(No quorum for official business)</i>
April 9, 2024	Meeting Canceled
May 22, 2024	Regular Meeting
June 11, 2024	Regular Meeting
July 9, 2024	Meeting Canceled
August 13, 2024	Regular Meeting
September 3, 2024	Work Session
September 10, 2024	Regular Meeting
September 24, 2024	Work Session
October 8, 2024	Regular Meeting
November 12, 2024	Regular Meeting
December 10, 2024	Regular Meeting

APPENDIX B: 2024 GRANT SUMMARY

Grant	Recipient/Project	Amount	Status
Sustainable Neighborhoods	GardenQuest—TerraCycle 1.0 (2023)	\$1,000	Completed
Sustainable Neighborhoods	GardenQuest—TerraCycle 2.0	\$1,000	Approved
Sustainable Neighborhoods	New Pollinator Gardens	\$1,000	Approved
Working Group	CanopyBloomington	\$4,000	Approved
Working Group	Cob Bench Project	\$1,000	Approved
Working Group	Bokashi Composting (2025)	\$5,000	Pending

APPENDIX C: COMMISSIONER ROSTER (AS OF DECEMBER 31, 2024)

Seat	Appointing Authority	Commissioner	Dates of Service
C-1	City Council	Alex Hakes	03/29/2023 – 06/05/2024
		Tara Dunderdale	06/19/2024 – Present
C-2	City Council	Justin Vasel	03/29/2023 – Present
C-3	City Council	Matt Austin	02/17/2022 – Present
C-4	City Council	Heidi Dowding	06/21/2023 – 01/31/2024
		Zero Rose	06/19/2025 – Present
C-5	City Council	Jon Eldon	12/07/2022 – Present
Ex-Council	City Council	Dave Rollo	01/10/2024 – Present
IU	Indiana University Sustainability	Jessica Davis	11/16/2022 – 11/20/2024
		Quentin Gilly	11/21/2024 – Present
M-1	Mayor	Nejla Routsong	02/01/2022 – 01/31/2024
		Hunter Hawley	08/06/2024 – Present
M-2	Mayor	Emma Ferguson	02/01/2022 – 01/31/2024
		Jami Scholl	02/01/2024 – Present
M-3	Mayor	Hannah Gregory	02/13/2023 – 06/30/2024
		Evan Nix	08/06/2024 – Present
M-4	Mayor	KateLyn Edwards	02/01/2023 – 08/14/2024
M-5	Mayor	Dennis Vera	06/15/2023 – 08/13/2024
M-6	Mayor	David Maenner	01/10/2022 – Present
MCC	Monroe County Commissioners	Nolan Hendon	10/15/2020 – 04/30/2024
		Andrew Guenther	05/01/2024 – Present