

New York City, NY—The annual conference of the American Planning Association (APA) takes place in New York City this week and includes awards ceremonies to honor the best planning projects in the United States. The Borough of Millvale, located just across the Allegheny River from Pittsburgh, is being recognized with a Silver 2017 National Planning Achievement Award for Environmental Planning. In addition, the APA's Sustainable Communities Division (SCD) honored Millvale's EcoDistrict Pivot Plan with a separate award designated for a Sustainability or Resiliency Plan at its annual reception.

“Good planning practices are a common thread between strong communities all across the country, large and small,” said Millvale Sustainability Coordinator, Zaheen Hussain. “It’s an honor to receive national recognition for the work Millvalians have been putting into building a stronger, more sustainable community for the better part of a decade. While we celebrate this achievement and the joys of accomplishing goals set within our Pivot Plan, let it be a reminder that this is only our start.”

evolveEA led the planning team in partnership with the Millvale Community Development Corporation, Millvale Community Library, Millvale Borough, New Sun Rising, Sisters of Saint Francis at Mt. Alvernia and other Millvale based community organizations. The Pivot Plan has been a continuing effort to improve quality of life for Millvale’s existing community while attracting new residents and businesses by building a unique EcoDistrict identity.

Since the completion of Millvale’s EcoDistrict Pivot 2.0 Plan last year, the community has made significant strides in its implementation. Funding was secured for more extensive work in the Pivot Plan’s Air and Equity categories, resulting in the “Breathe Easy” report and a Community Needs Assessment. Breathe Easy, supported by the Heinz Endowments and facilitated by evolveEA, recommends actions and projects to improve air quality at the individual scale, in the borough, and in the region. The Needs Assessment kicked off this spring at the Millvale Environment & Health Fair in collaboration with GTECH Strategies—it is designed to gauge issues in the Borough related to economic opportunity, education, health and other aspects of social equity among residents.

Other recent accomplishments inspired by the EcoDistrict Pivot Plan include a 32kW solar installation on the Millvale Community Center, saving the Borough energy costs and offsetting 27.5 tons of CO2 emissions while helping to make Millvale more resilient in the face of potential natural disasters. The installation was leveraged to provide job training to 10 Millvale teens in the field of renewable energy through the Millvale Library Teen Solar Fellowship. Also back this year is a weekly farm stand providing Millvalians access to fresh, healthy produce and helping to reduce food insecurity in the community.

“Good planning is not just preparing the community for the future, but engaging the residents in the discussions and decision-making that will impact their lives,” said W. Shedrick Coleman, AIA, 2017 chair of APA’s Awards Jury. “This year’s award recipients advanced the planning profession by more thoroughly engaging all residents in the planning process.”

Like many riverfront mill towns, Millvale lost many businesses and residents as manufacturing declined. The town was further challenged by a history of flooding, poor air quality and a reputation as a food desert—all factors that threaten the well-being of its residents. The Pivot Plan incorporated feedback from area residents about how to address these issues, particularly those related to energy, water, food, mobility, air and equity.

The Town Center Food Hub was identified as a focus project by the community during the first round of EcoDistrict planning (2013) in order to address the town’s “food desert” status. The Food Hub is opening in a reused building this year to house offices, a food-based workforce development program and a café at street level. More recently, New Sun Rising acquired Millvale’s Moose Lodge and is repurposing the space as a business incubator and commercial kitchen for food entrepreneurs.