

# NEW ECOLOGY **Building Well**

25 Years of Sustainable Community Development

■ WINTER 2024 Special Edition

## A NOTE FROM THE BOARD

This special edition of our newsletter celebrates Ed Connelly and his incredible journey at New Ecology. Ed stepped into the President role in 2004 and has spent nearly two decades building the organization, a network of partners, and the broader field.

At the time, low-income communities were often overlooked in the climate change conversation, and this injustice became Ed's passion as he sought to bring healthier living conditions and environmental benefits to multifamily affordable housing. With gravitas, tenacity, curiosity, good listening, and a strong compass toward justice, Ed executed, using building science and benchmarking, high-quality advising, and monitoring operations to advance the field. Never discouraged by challenges, Ed advanced New Ecology's work and steadily grew the organization from a concept with just 2 employees to an influencer with more than 60 staff today.

While the organization's evolution is important, Ed's most lasting impact on the field will be the countless number of lives he has inspired—graduates and interns, architects, contractors, property managers, owners, and partners who have learned so much from this meaningful work. Humble, resolved, compassionate, and unafraid to be honest and take entrepreneurial risks, Ed has truly led by example.

To Ed: Congratulations as you explore your next chapter, the retirement you deserve, and many relaxing times with your family. New Ecology will miss you, and will march on in the indelible spirit you leave with your staff and Board.

— Becky Regan, New Ecology Board Treasurer, on behalf of the New Ecology Board of Directors

## Data Storytelling, Continuous Learning, and Sustainable Communities — A Review of 20 Years of Green Innovation with Ed Connelly

BY MICHELLE MORAN, SENIOR ASSOCIATE, AND ALINA MICHELEWICZ, PRINCIPAL DIRECTOR OF FINANCE. EDITED BY STACY NEAL, COO, AND AND MOLLY CRAFT, ASSISTANT PROJECT MANAGER.

*For many of our readers, you need no introduction. But for those who do not know you, tell us a bit about yourself and New Ecology's approach.*



I've always aimed to take the principles of sustainability and try to actually implement them, to enhance sustainable efforts in community development.

I've been the president of New Ecology since 2004—almost 20 years. The first task that I had was to expand a brief report on the [Costs and Benefits of Green Affordable Housing](#) into a full-blown effort. I think we had about 15 case studies from across the country highlighting green affordable housing. Today, New Ecology works on 250-300 of these projects at a time!

In the past 20 years, we've worked on well over 200,000 units of housing. Assuming that two to three people live in each unit, we've helped way more than a half million people to have better housing!

### *How did you work with potential partners to grow at that incredible pace?*

I knew that if we were going to be successful, we had to demonstrate why what we were advocating was better than common practice. We told people, "If you air seal and insulate buildings, you'll cut down on operating costs and improve occupant's lives." They said, "Show us!" We demonstrated, by working with architects and contractors, that they could build this way without substantial cost or disruption to the construction cycle. We used data to show that these buildings actually performed way better than code-built or existing buildings, benefitting owners, property managers, and tenants.

One of the big advantages New Ecology has had working on many projects over time is, we're continuously learning about what's working. We've always been proud of working with the same owners and developers multiple times over the years. It's cool to see a project move to more advanced or better building techniques—and then that improvement is the starting point for the next project with that team, and so on.

You can call what we do a lot of things—a little bit bootstrapping, a little bit sequential continuous quality improvement.

*continued on next 5 pages*

**Could you talk a little more about the data acquisition piece of New Ecology's approach, and how it relates to the storytelling the organization does?**



Early on, it was clear to me that we needed to collect energy data on buildings to prove that our approach worked. I remember asking our interns, "What is a green building, and how do you define whether it is actually built to a better standard?" Nobody could answer that question at the time. That led us to measure utility data, to figure out if these buildings are actually better. We started to do that in spreadsheets, and quickly realized, this is impossible to do in a spreadsheet!

So, we teamed up with Barun Singh, who had an idea of creating a database, and formed what eventually became WegoWise. We gathered data on much of the affordable housing in Massachusetts and Connecticut to populate it. We started to show what percentage of these buildings were performing better, how much lower-cost they were to operate.

Later, we collaborated with the Harvard School of Public Health to measure health benefits in some communities—studies that were done at Old Colony in South Boston, showing the impact of the high-performance practices we were advocating for. They showed that children missed less school when they lived in the buildings that we had helped build because their asthma was better—because there was less toxic material, better ventilation, less use of pesticides, etc.<sup>1</sup> Those outcomes bring stability to families and to neighborhoods.

To demonstrate to a building owner that the techniques we've developed will save them a bunch of money, we tell a story about how this worked for another owner. It's conversation and storytelling, advocacy, and persuasion rolled into one. One of our hallmarks as an organization is to be able to say we're not just theorizing—we can demonstrate that this works.



<sup>1</sup>Colton et. al. (2015). Health Benefits of Green Public Housing: Associations with Asthma Morbidity and Building-Related Symptoms. American Journal of Public Health, 105(12), 2482-2489.

## NEW ECOLOGY, INC. OVER THE YEARS

**1999**

Founded

**2004**

Ed hired!



First Green

Building Charrette

**2005**

Costs and Benefits of Green  
Affordable Housing published

First Enterprise Green  
Communities project

**2006**

Began work on energy  
database, now WegoWise

**2007**

First LEED projects

**2009**

Move to Boston from Cambridge

Formation of LEAN Multifamily  
program

**2011**

WegoWise forms separate entity

**2013**

Beginning of partnership with  
Elevate

**2014**

Hartford, Connecticut office  
opened

### Can you talk about the work New Ecology is doing in the Mid-Atlantic?

Some of what we were doing in New England was being recognized nationwide when we published that Costs and Benefits of Green Affordable Housing report. I must have done 100 lectures across the country. People took notice and said, "Can we expand it?"



We raised grant funds to be able to take what we learned in Massachusetts and bring it to other places. Ultimately, we opened offices in the Mid-Atlantic because of opportunities in Delaware and Maryland.

This work is hyperlocal—but the theory behind it applies anywhere. We started to expand by having people located in these cities build relationships and explain impact. The work ends up being slightly different in every place, affected by zoning, building codes, politics, utility programs, housing finance agency priorities. But, big-picture, it looks the same.



The work in Delaware has focused on developing programs to renovate existing housing and bring green practices to newly constructed housing. A city like Wilmington is underdeveloped, under resourced, and has a lot of vacant land and housing. Working with local actors to improve non-regulated, naturally occurring affordable housing (NOAH) is a big part of what we do in Delaware. Baltimore has focused on working with architecture firms to advance their skill sets, and working with the state Department of

**2015**

Baltimore, Maryland office opened

**2016**

ReMO service started

**2017**

Wilmington, Delaware office opened

**2018**

First Passive House (Phius) project

**2019**

Awarded Energy Star Market Leader

**2020**

COVID! Remote work model; growth despite adversity

**2021**

Zero Over Time Planning offered

**2022**

Naturally Occurring Affordable Housing (NOAH) and workforce training programs in Delaware

**2023**

Formalized new organizational structure, created a Management Team

**2024**

Celebrating 25 years of sustainable community development!

Housing and Community Development to bring techniques, processes, and experience to the housing development field there.

***What are some factors that have been surprising as you've watched this field develop throughout your career?***

The way we build vs. operate buildings are often divorced from each other. The lack of communication in early stages of building design and construction has always astounded me—the people who are actually going to live with this building and run it for 10 or 15 or 50 years aren't making the decisions on how it's built. That's something that we've tried to bridge when we do charrettes.



Another thing that surprised me is how many places in the country haven't fully embraced what we've done. Now, with all the federal money coming to regions via the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), we see that a lot of what we take for granted in the places we work—access to incentives, resources, mandates to build better buildings—is not true in other parts of the country. Even though New Ecology has goals in terms of climate resilience, energy efficiency, and reducing carbon, we still can't talk about that universally—sometimes we have to do it a bit surreptitiously.

***What advice would you give to someone making their way on this journey, given the overwhelming nature of the work and climate change?***

There's a tendency to think these everything these days should change as quickly as things like smartphones and social media, but that's not how most things work. There's a tendency to think everything should change as quickly, but that's not how most things work. In an industry that's as old and established as construction, you're not going to affect change that way.



**Looking to make a direct impact on your community?** New Ecology is looking to expand our team of mission-driven individuals. We are currently hiring for:

- Energy Engineer (Mid-Atlantic)
- Assistant Construction Project Manager (Wilmington)
- Senior Project Manager (Boston)
- Director of Green Building Services (Boston)
- HERS Rater (Wilmington)

Visit <https://www.newecology.org/category/jobs/> for more information and to apply.

Pass this along to your professional networks!

**NEWSLETTER CONTRIBUTORS:**  
ED CONNELLY, MOLLY CRAFT,  
MARTY JOSTEN, ALINA  
MICHELEWICZ, MICHELLE MORAN,  
STACY NEAL, LAUREN WILKINS.

To think about what you can do to just have today be better than yesterday is key. This field is still new and developing, and there are many kinds of expertise needed. Looking at your own skills and experience, and picking the pieces that are going to be useful to problem-solving in the sustainable world, is the way to think about it.

The only way this can work is when there's a team working closely, bringing different skill sets and creating new approaches. It's purposeful that our staff is that way, because it's the kind of team we really needed in order to do what we've done. Working incrementally together is the best thing we can do as we address these challenges. I think that's why we've become a well-respected organization that is continuing to innovate and have a big influence beyond the 60 individuals on our staff.

**What are some of your proudest moments or achievements with New Ecology and in this industry?**

I'm proudest of how many people New Ecology has worked with, trained, and influenced, from policy makers, to building owners, to our staff, to staff of other organizations. Buildings will be here 50 or 100 years and then they'll be gone, but hopefully the people that have been influenced by this approach will each go out and influence more and more people, and that will just keep growing.



I'm also very proud that our organization has developed as a non-profit business that provides valuable services to clients, and we also have the ability to raise grant funds for things that are not market-ready yet. We can experiment and continue to innovate in the field. We've been able to be both practical and mission-based.

**What are you excited about for New Ecology? What are your final reflections on your career, the organization, and the field?**

There's a bunch to be really excited about! Making Passive House the standard and training architects, contractors, subcontractors, building owners, tenants—that's something that I think is going to continue to grow and be done in even better ways.

Another is the focus on decarbonizing existing buildings. Thinking about how we enable people to electrify over a period of time, especially in occupied buildings, is really critical. We've reorganized ourselves over the past year and a half to be able to attack this problem at New Ecology, and we're starting to have some early success.

The third is the increased attention on NOAH. A lot of our work has been in the subsidized affordable housing worlds, where there's money for building or renovating projects. But most people that are low-income live in privately-owned housing that's not directly subsidized. Figuring out that challenge is going to be a big part of what New Ecology does in the next few years, requiring a new level of innovation. We need to train construction managers for these small NOAH jobs. The key to getting those done is having a good construction manager on-site making sure the work is done well.



## LET'S TALK

New Ecology is eager to work with partners who are interested in learning more about our work and how we can help you to achieve your project's goals. We have worked on hundreds of projects for owners in market sectors including housing, office, retail, education, healthcare, government, arts, and nonprofit.

Our passion and commitment is best demonstrated by the fact that we have been at the leading edge of community-based sustainable development since 1999.

At the same time, our reach, approach and successful model have helped us attract and retain a talented staff known for its desire to make advances in a new and growing field.

Interested in learning more? Contact [info@newecology.org](mailto:info@newecology.org) or call 617-557-1700.



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Finally, the innovation in financing that comes through IRA funding, the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund, and other funds that are coming out, have the potential to move the needle and require that in order to get financing, you have to demonstrate some level of decarbonization. At that point, we'll have really changed the entire system.



I think New Ecology is in a really good place. It's taken so many people to do this work! I'm not walking out the door with all the skills in my backpack—they're spread deeply throughout the whole organization. It'll be really interesting to see what a different voice New Ecology's next leader will bring to the work. It's exciting to be able to watch it and not have to do it!

## LISTEN UP!

Did you enjoy reading this interview? Learn something new? There's more where that came from! New Ecology is proud to announce that we are launching a brand-new podcast called *BuildingWell: Sustainable Homes, Equitable Communities*. The podcast aims to increase awareness of sustainable development practices within the affordable housing sector. We will highlight topics related to the practical application of technologies and incentives, as well as the overall development and reach of the green building and community development fields.

The first episode will be released in the next few weeks. Be on the lookout on our social media for details!

