

STATE OF SSDN

2012-2025





RESILIENT COMMUNITIES. CONNECTED LEADERS.

Edited and written by: Amanda Nalley, Caitlin Rose, Chris Pembleton, Gabriela Sanchez Barrocas, Michael Dexter, Nick Deffley, and Rob Phocas.

Designed by: Amanda Nalley, Daniel A. Miguel, and Krista Early using Canva.

Editors note: This document is a retrospective of SSDN's impacts and history, alongside 2025 annual report updates. Moving forward, we plan to have traditional annual report outs.

From Our Executive Director



Rob Phocas



Every day, local government leaders across the Southeast tackle complex challenges while creating healthier, more resilient communities. They don't have all the answers, but through SSDN, they have each other.

This report highlights how far our network has come since its founding and the impact we've made together. It's also a reminder that SSDN's greatest strength isn't a program or an event, it's the people.

To our funders and partners, thank you for believing in the power of local leadership. Your support helps ensure that communities across the Southeast have access to the connections, ideas, and resources they need to address today's challenges and prepare for tomorrow's opportunities.

As we look ahead, we're excited to continue growing this community, strengthening member connections, and creating even more opportunities to learn from one another. Our members create healthy communities, and a better quality of life for all.

Thank you for being part of SSDN's next chapter.

A handwritten signature of Rob Phocas in black ink.

From Our Board



Since our earliest days, this network has been built by members who willingly share their knowledge, support one another, and believe that we're stronger when we work together. What began as a small group of professionals seeking a space that understood the unique needs of the Southeast, grew into a group ready to take flight. Today, we are a trusted community serving leaders.

This report celebrates that journey: where we've been, where we are today, and the opportunities ahead.

On behalf of the Board of Directors, thank you to those that brought us here: our members, our funders, our partners, our staff. Your investment makes it possible for SSDN to thrive and succeed.

As you read these pages, I hope you're reminded of what makes SSDN special: a network built on collaboration, practical solutions, and the belief that none of us has to do this work alone.

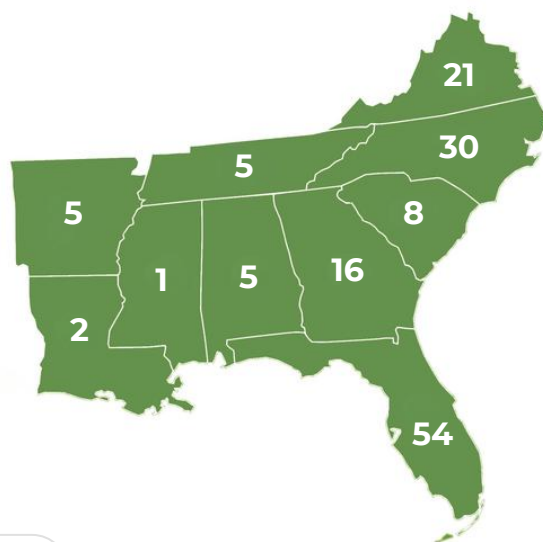
Laura Thomas

Laura Thomas
Board President

About Us



The Southeast Sustainability Directors Network (SSDN) is comprised of local government sustainability professionals from cities, town, counties and Tribal governments in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia.



10

states

145+

member communities
and Tribes
(see map for state by
state distribution)

450+

individual
participants

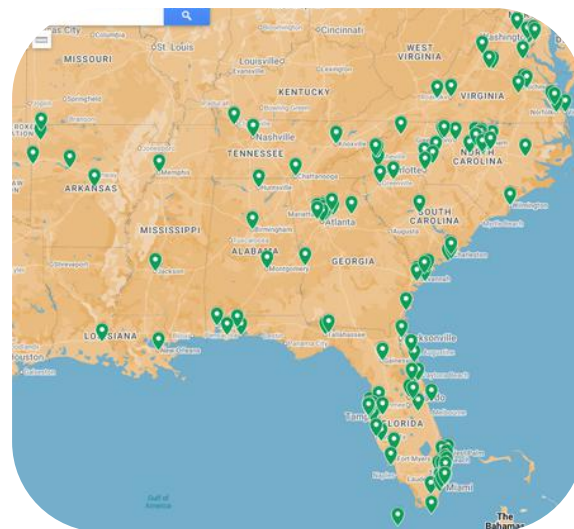
Our Member Communities

\$50-75K

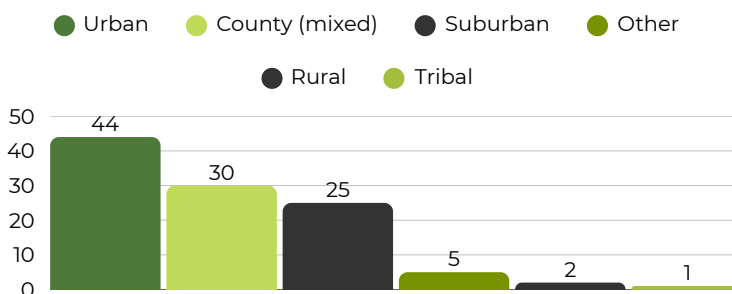
Median household income

328K

Average population



Community types



What our members say

If your local government **only joins one association, it should be SSDN**. It is the most hands on, info-forward group out there. - Alison Higgins, Key West, FL

SSDN connects the best with the best. In good times and trying times, this network sticks together and supports each other in ways I have never experienced before. It takes passion and grit to do this important work and **SSDN network and staff have what it takes!** - Megan Hale, Norfolk, VA

SSDN is the fiber that connects sustainability professionals across the Southeast. **The South will be stronger, safer, and more resilient because of SSDN.** - Emily Irvine, Charlottesville, VA



Our Strategy

The Southeast Sustainability Directors Network (SSDN) is a member-driven network whereby our core values, mission, vision, and theory of change are developed by members, and based on members' needs. Members develop the network's goals, strategies, activities, and principles. The outcomes of success of all of SSDN's work are measured by membership engagement and collaboration that scales sustainability best practices beyond the local government to the region.



OUR MISSION

We exist to accelerate and scale implementation of local government sustainability best practices through a member-driven network of professionals who collaborate to solve problems, innovate to create equitable solutions, and influence decision-makers.

OUR VISION

Our vision is to motivate local governments to continually integrate and institutionalize sustainability best practices throughout every town, city, and county in the Southeast.



SSDN'S **STRATEGIC PILLARS**

Foundational Pillar

SSDN maintains and supports close connections among members and facilitates a trusted environment around which all of SSDN's strategic goals are built and implemented.

1

Grow the Field

More communities commit to implementing sustainable and resilient solutions for all.

2

Build Member Capacity

Local governments and Tribes have the capacity to implement best practices in their communities.

3

Align Practitioners

Members collaborate to develop solutions to scale sustainability practices.

4

Build a Strong Organization

Building and maintaining a thriving organization rooted in the network model.

Our Programs

Membership

Cities, towns, counties, and Tribes within the 10 SSDN states may join as a member community. Dues are based on community size and paid annually. Anyone within a member community that works on sustainability and resilience issues are welcome to participate in the networks member exclusive events and resources.



State Policy

Launched in 2019, the State Policy Program helps local governments build capacity to engage in legislative and regulatory decisions, advance their climate and energy goals by educating our members about state policy issues, connect them with resources, knowledge, and expertise, and provide direct support through policy research, analysis, and resource development.

Federal Funding

Launched in 2021, the Federal Funding Program offers a range of services to communities and organizations across the Southeast. Originally focused on one-on-one technical assistance to help members better understand the federal funding landscape, the program has since grown to include more than six projects spanning federally-supported technical assistance initiatives in water management, energy resilience, and energy efficiency, alongside philanthropically-funded grant management support to communities.



Member-Only Offerings

SSDN membership comes with several perks that are for our members only. Learn more about these offerings.

ListServ and Member Hub

More than 1,650 email threads have been posted since the SSDN ListServ through Google Groups began in 2020.

In 2026, we rolled out our new Member Hub by Mighty Networks. This platform offers a similar space as the ListServ with the added benefits of being searchable, password protected, and a social space.



Workgroups & Peer Learning

Workgroups are virtual gatherings that occur in semesters (spring, summer, fall), and are usually held once a month. Topics are selected by member survey input and expand learning opportunities.

Green Grants Exchange

Created in 2026 with the help of five Georgia Tech students, this resource helps members and others visualize grant applications, projects, and analytics from more than 50 federal and state sustainability grant programs. Application success rate, level of interest, and in many cases project narratives, budgets, and other applicant information are also included.



State Calls

SSDN facilitates monthly state network calls for members in specific states. These calls provide the foundation for peer-to-peer learning between members encountering similar state-specific barriers, and feature conversations around pertinent state policy issues, state funding opportunities, and peer relationship building.

In-person State Meetings

SSDN regularly convenes state networks in person to continue and deepen conversations providing regular opportunities for relationship building, peer learning, and in-depth policy work.



Annual Meetings



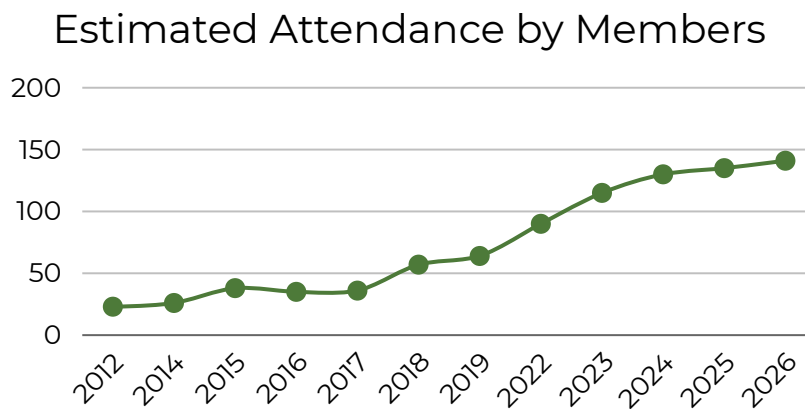
SSDN 2026 Annual Meeting in Tampa, FL

SSDN's Annual Meeting brings together local government professionals from the Southeast to exchange ideas, build relationships, and learn from one another's real-world sustainability and resilience efforts—all while experiencing the culture and character of the host city.

Since 2012, we have hosted 14 Annual Meetings, growing the event from a small, intimate gathering into a premier regional convening of nearly 200 local government leaders and practitioners. Our sponsor community has expanded alongside it. At our 2026 Annual Meeting in Tampa, Florida, we secured more than \$100,000 in sponsorship support, helping to fund member scholarships, expand participation, and enhance the overall conference experience.

We are excited to continue this momentum at our 2027 Annual Meeting, which will take place in Birmingham, Alabama, from May 4–7!

Annual Meetings Through the Years



Locations

- 📍 Asheville, NC 2012
- 📍 Chattanooga, TN 2013
- 📍 Orlando, FL 2014
- 📍 Charleston, SC 2015
- 📍 Atlanta, GA 2016
- 📍 Durham, NC 2017
- 📍 Nashville, TN 2018
- 📍 Sarasota, FL 2019
- 📍 Savannah, GA 2022
- 📍 Little Rock, AR 2023
- 📍 Charlotte, NC 2024
- 📍 Richmond, VA 2025
- 📍 Tampa, FL 2026
- 📍 Birmingham, AL 2027



Annual Meetings

Look How We've Grown!



Asheville, NC



Orlando, FL



Charleston, SC

2012

2014

2015

2018

2017

2016

Nashville, TN

Durham, NC

Atlanta, GA



Annual Meetings

Look How We've Grown!



Sarasota, FL



Savannah, GA

2019

2020

2021

2022

2025

2024

2023

Richmond, VA

Charlotte, NC

Little Rock, AR



Public-facing Offerings

SSDN also provides several public-facing offerings in an effort to continue promotion and support of sustainability across the Southeast.

Green Minds Podcast

First aired in 2017, the Green Minds Podcast is a member-led, member-hosted feature with over 61 individual shows available on most major podcast outlets. The show has had more than 5,900 downloads and more than 2,000 listeners since it began.



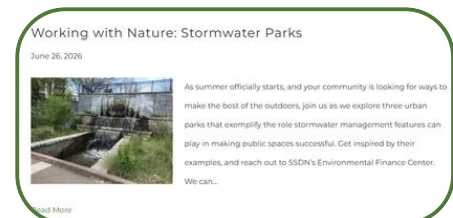
SSDN Social Media

While SSDN has experimented with a variety of social media platforms over the years, including Instagram, Twitter/X, Facebook, and YouTube, the one that has had the largest and most consistent presence is LinkedIn. The platform currently has over 3,500 followers.



SSDN Website

SSDN's website is more than a place to find out what we do. The website includes news & stories, community resources, and more.



Energy for All Y'all

Energy for All Y'all is an Invest in Our Future grant-funded program partnering SSDN with Generation 180 and the Sustainability and CE. The campaign works to create positive stories and news surrounding sustainable and resilient energy options.





Federal Funding Programs

SSDN offers various Technical Assistance services to help communities across the Southeast advance projects from ideation to implementation. Technical assistance services include support in accessing funding, modeling and project design.

The Southeast Sustainable Recovery Center (SSRC)

The SSRC was started in 2021 as a flexible service to fill gaps and help communities in the Southeast compete more successfully for funding opportunities from federal, state, and local sources. Since formation of the Center, SSDN has developed the following distinct technical assistance projects:



Community Capacity and Resilience Navigator (CCRN)

CCRN is SSDN's philanthropic technical assistance program to help communities move from idea to implementation through grant development, project scoping, funding navigation. This project evolved from SSDN's prior role in the Local Infrastructure Hub.



Energy Technology Innovation Partnership Project (ETIPP)

ETIPP is a U.S. Department of Energy initiative aimed at enhancing energy resilience, affordability, and reliability in island, coastal, and remote communities through technical assistance and planning. As a Gulf Coast Regional Partner, SSDN collaborates with communities in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida to create strategic energy plans and address specific energy issues. In 2025, SSDN partnered with Key West on energy planning and will expand to new projects with Sanibel and Cedar Key in 2026, while also supporting communities applying for future ETIPP cohorts.

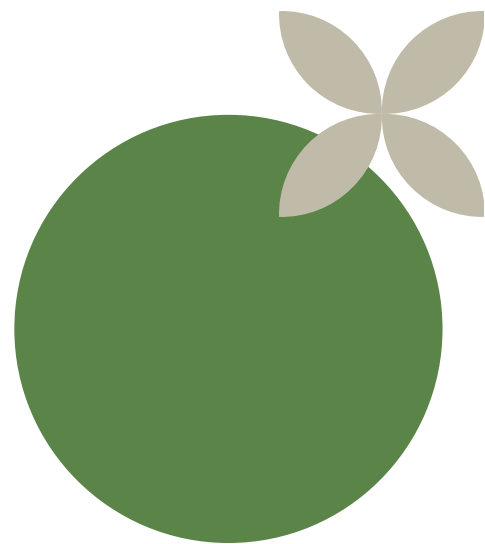
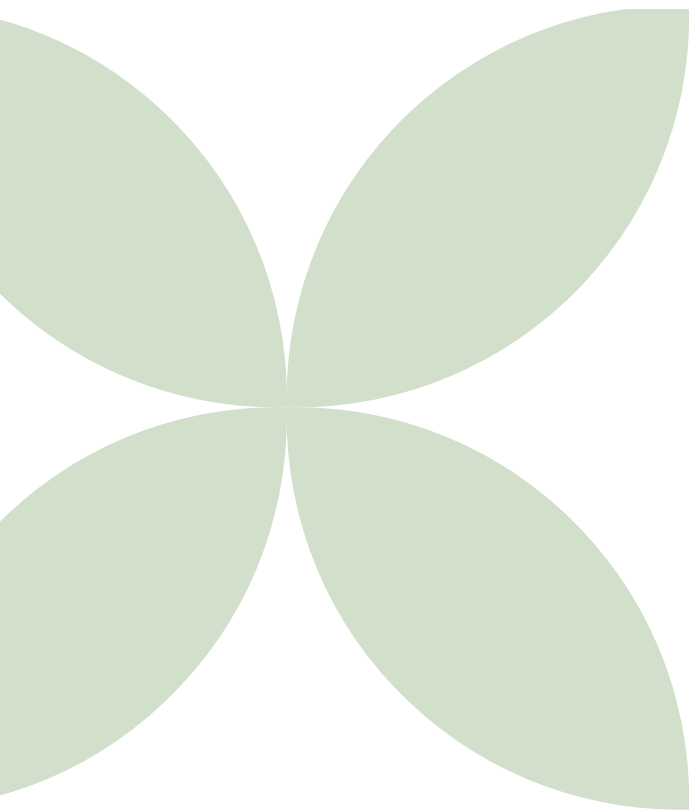


Environmental Finance Center (EFC)

In 2022, SSDN is an Environmental Finance Center for EPA Region 4. The federal program has been supporting states like Alabama and Florida since 1992. It assists communities in accessing federal funding for water infrastructure projects, including drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater, focusing on green infrastructure. Services include funding navigation, community outreach, capacity building, and policy analysis, all provided at no cost.



Formation & Growth



Formative Years

As told by founders Maggie Ullman and Susanna Sutherland

In the early 2010s, sustainability professionals across the South were often departments of one in communities with unique political, economic, and cultural contexts, often without peers nearby who understood the challenges of doing this work in the South.

Dr. Susanna Sutherland, then with the City of Knoxville, Tennessee, and Maggie Ullman, then Sustainability Manager for the City of Asheville, North Carolina, were two such professionals who found each other, and then founded SSDN.

“The network started very simply,” Ullman said. “Susanna and I made a list of Southern cities we knew were beginning sustainability work and started making phone calls. What we discovered was a tremendous hunger for connection. People were eager not just to share best practices, but to build community.”

The team planned their first in-person meeting, held in 2012 in Asheville and with support from the Urban Sustainability Directors Network (USDN), guidance from network development consultants, and leadership from an inaugural Steering Committee, SSDN officially took shape.

“It gave the region a respected climate voice and power positioning with partners,” Sutherland said. “It filled an infrastructure gap that held the region back before.”

Today, SSDN has grown from a small gathering of local government leaders into a trusted regional network serving hundreds of sustainability and resilience professionals.

Thank you to our founders for their vision, passion, and time.



Pictured: Dr. Susanna Sutherland, left, and Maggie Ullman.

“
It reminded sustainability professionals across the South that they were not alone. -
Maggie Ullman



Dr. Susanna Sutherland is principal for Sutherland & Associates, whose mission it is to enable investments that help people create new ways of taking climate action.



Asheville, NC Councilwoman Maggie Ullman is principal for Ullman Consulting, specializing in leading, managing and advising mission-driven partnerships across climate change, urban resilience, and disaster recovery.

Founding Members

"At the time, sustainability offices were few and far between. I saw major cities doing things that most of us could only dream of in the south. SSDN offers a place for sustainability staff facing similar challenges to learn from each other, celebrate, and sometimes commiserate."

- **Glen Hadwen**, sustainability manager for the city of Fort Lauderdale, Florida



2015 Annual Meeting Charleston, photo courtesy of Peter Nierengarten

"SSDN has evolved from its small and humble beginnings into a well-run and well-respected organization."

- **John Richardson**, community sustainability manager, city of Chapel Hill, North Carolina



2017 Annual Meeting Durham, North Carolina



2015 Annual Meeting Charleston, photo courtesy of Peter Nierengarten

"I immediately knew I was amongst 'my people.' This group has been a real lifeline throughout the years, and I've enjoyed seeing the growth and the young new faces coming in."

- **Mary Pat Baldauf**, sustainability facilitator, City of Columbia, South Carolina

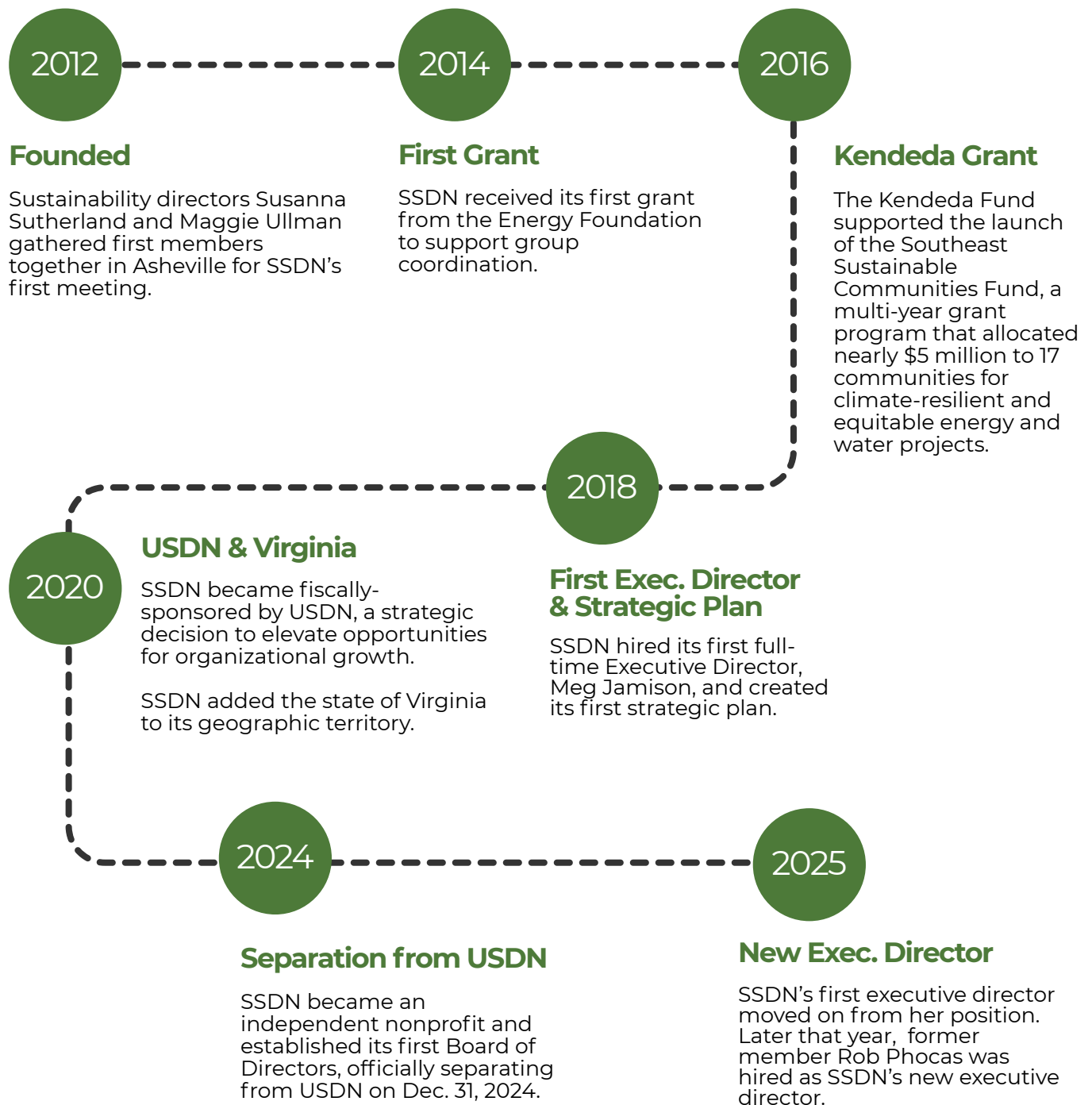


2017 Annual Meeting Durham, North Carolina

"Being able to collaborate with people who got what we were doing, that was important. It was important for us to feel like I'm not in this alone."

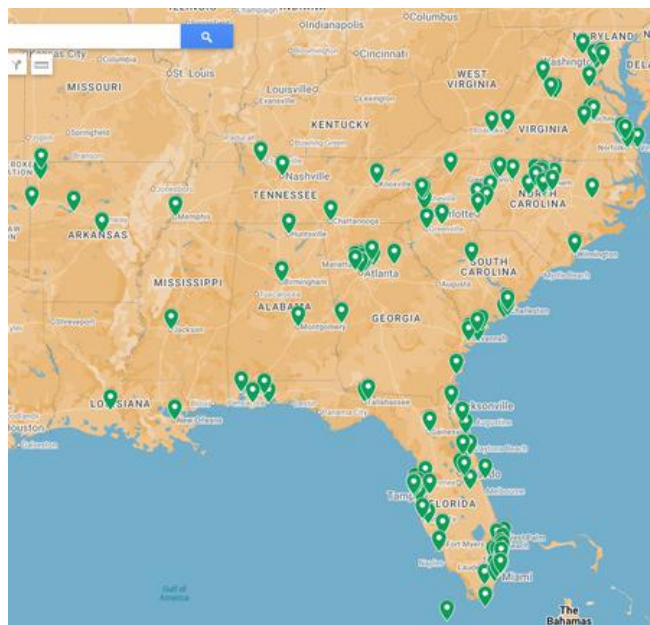
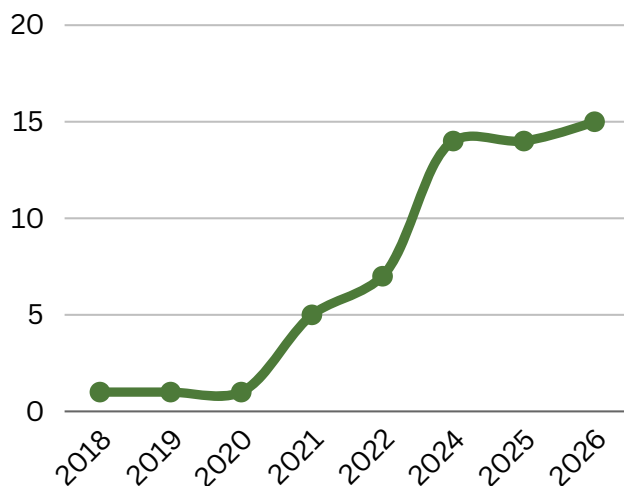
- **Tobin Freid**, sustainability manager, Durham County, North Carolina

A Timeline

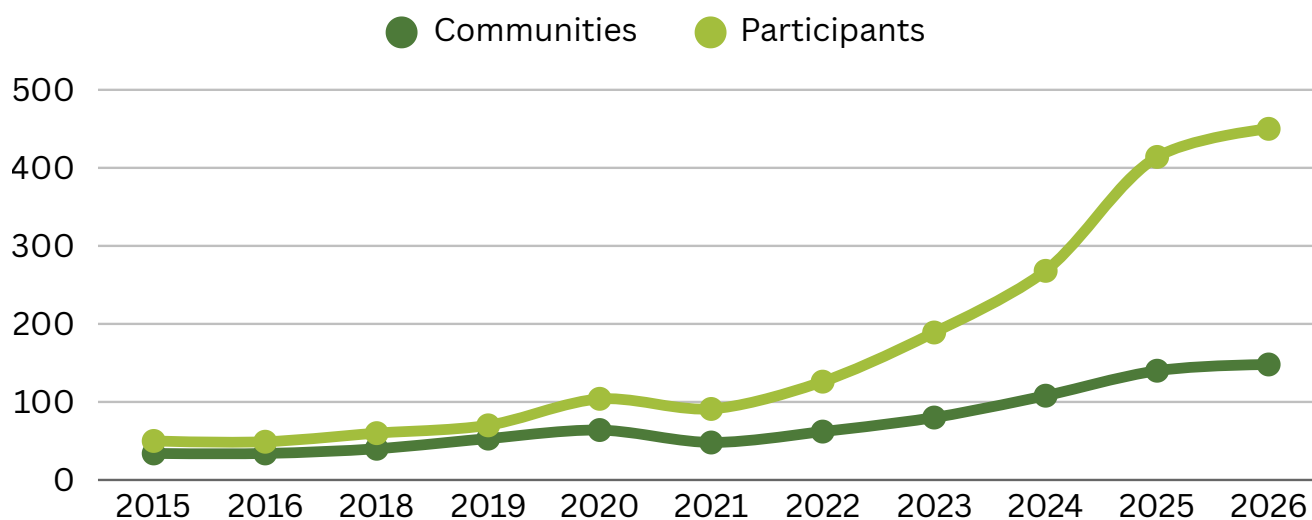


Growth

Staff Growth



Membership Growth





Who helped us grow

SSDN achieved success thanks to the invaluable support from our partners and funders listed below. We sincerely appreciate your contributions.



Bezos Family Foundation
Arthur M. Blank Foundation
BuildUS
U.S. Energy Foundation
Invest in Our Future
The Kendeda Fund
The Kresge Foundation
Lyndhurst Foundation
Merck Foundation
Mosaic Company Foundation

Curtis & Edith Munson Foundation
Oak Hill Fund
Ray C. Anderson Foundation
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
Roddenberry Foundation
Summit Foundation
Turner Foundation
Water Foundation
Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation



A special thanks to...

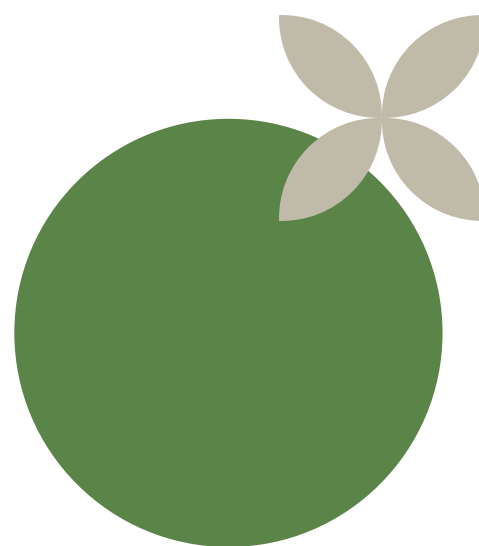
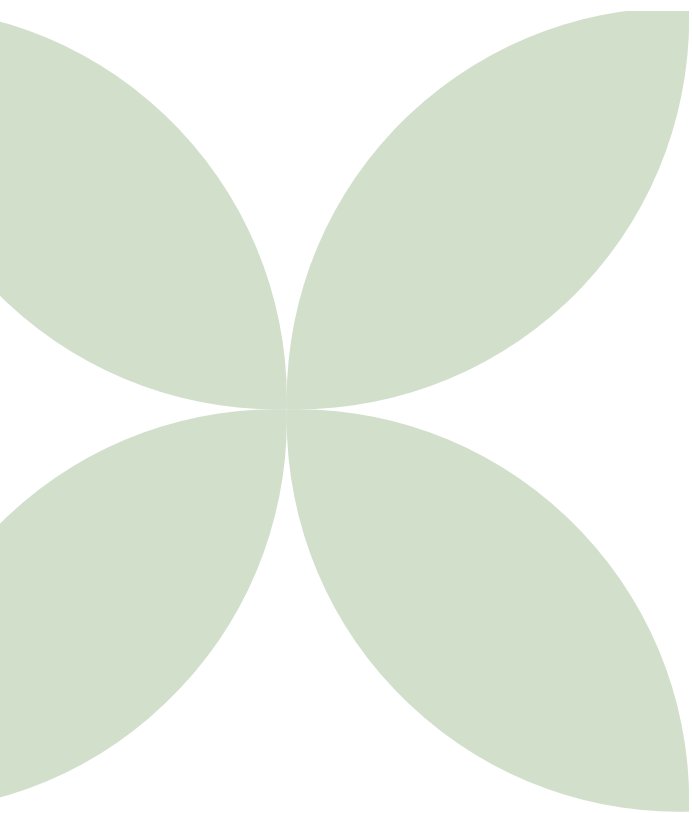
SSDN founding members Glen Hadwen, John Richardson, Maggie Ullman, Mary Pat Baldouf, Peter Neirengarten, Dr. Susanna Sutherland, and Tobin Freid for their walk down memory lane as we created this document;

and

former staff who led us to where we are today: Ann Livingston, Casi Callaway, Drew Woodward, Meg Jamison, Rachel Usher, Riyza Jose Morales, and Vanessa King.



2025 and Beyond



A Year of Changes



In 2025, SSDN experienced some of the most transformative changes since the COVID shutdown. Our members also saw significant changes to the national conversation around sustainability and resilience, witnessing millions of dollars in grant terminations, and other impacts to the federal and state policy landscape. Even in the face of these challenges, SSDN's members and staff continued to advance work supporting communities, improving energy efficiency, and serving as a model for how to continue leading in the face of changing pressures.

Transition to Nonprofit Status

On Jan. 1, SSDN officially became an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit, finalizing our official separation from USDN.

Team Expansion

Between January and February, we welcomed three new staff members: an accounts and grants manager, our first communications manager, and a Tennessee Valley policy manager.

Leadership Change

By the end of that same month, our long-time Executive Director, Meg Jamison, stepped down as she and her family relocated across the country.

Rapid changes were unfolding, yet we successfully held our Annual Meeting. The resilience of our team and members shone through, with many remarking that it felt as if nothing had shifted in our operations. This demonstrates our unwavering commitment to the mission and goals of SSDN. To maintain our trajectory, two interim directors guided us, and in the fall, we happily welcomed our new leader, Rob Phocas.

Meet Our Staff

Leadership



Rob Phocas
Executive Director



Nick Deffley
Deputy Director



Caitlin Rose
Sr. Director
Innovation & Strategy



Chris Pembleton
Sr. Director
Finance & Operations



Michael Dexter
Sr. Director
Implementation & Impact

Membership and Operations



Gabriela Sanchez
Barrocas
Membership Manager



Amanda Nalley
Communications
Manager



Ireon Weaver
Operations & Program
Support Manager

Funding Team



Krista Early
Funding Resources
Manager



Catherine
Mercier-Baggett
Dir., Federal Technical
Assistance



Jake Leech
Sr. Manager Coastal
Programs

Policy Team



Jenna Guillen
Sr. State Policy Manager,
Tennessee Valley & North
Carolina



Emily Morrow
Virginia & North Carolina
State Policy Manager



Joy Ward
Georgia & South
Carolina State Policy
Manager



Daniel A. Miguel
Florida State Policy
Manager, Florida

Meet Our Board



President Laura Thomas
(Richmond, VA)



Vice President
Lori Forsman
(Orange County, FL)



Treasurer Melody Yin
(Clearwater, FL)



Secretary
Jeanette Johnson
(Wake Forest, NC)



Chandra Farley
(Atlanta, GA)



Jennifer Westerholm
(Nashville, TN)



Alia Garrett
(Sarasota County, FL)



Megan Pendell
(Durham County, NC)



Greg Sponseller
(Holly Springs, NC)



George Santucci
(Boone, NC)



Lennie Massanelli
(Little Rock, AR)



David Ingram
(Wilmington, NC)



Alannah Irwin
(Boynton Beach, FL)

Committees

The SSDN Board hosts six committees to work on specific items. These committees have board, staff, and member participants who work on sustainability and resilience within their communities.

Audit Committee

Supports financial accountability, reviews audit results, and helps address financial risks and concerns.

Executive Committee

Financial oversight, board governance, executive director support, and committee coordination.

Finance Committee

Reviews budgets, financial reports, and trends to help maintain strong financial health.

Governance Committee

Recruits, nominates, onboards, develops, and annually evaluates Board of Directors members.

Membership Committee

Strengthens peer connections, expands and enhances engagement, and aligns services with members' evolving needs.

Strategic Plan Committee

Provide guidance on organizational strategic planning, goal setting, and major policy development.

Impacts

39 Webinar-style workgroups and impromptu meetings hosted for our members focused on 13 different topics and with a total attendance of 800+

93 Participants (from 71 organizations) learned how to apply for Community Grants during training sessions led by SSDN's Environmental Finance Center

24 Partner organizations engaged with the Environmental Finance Center

8 Community outreach activities completed by the EFC

8 Communities received EFC direct technical assistance

14 Newsletters highlighting EFC-related funding opportunities

3 ETIPP Cohort 5 applications were selected with the help of our staff

5 GA communities supported in their engagement of the Georgia Power IRP process, resulting in a dedicated carve out for municipalities and others to participate in a solar + storage pilot program

17 North Carolina local govts directly engaged in Duke Energy Carbon Plan IRP under our coordination (this is a record number)

1.5K New LinkedIn followers

64K LinkedIn impressions

900+ Podcast listens



Impacts

Supported Grant Narrative Development & Awards

City of West Palm Beach, FL - \$17,785

FDACS Urban and Community Forestry Inflation Reduction Act Grant
GROW West Palm Beach Initiative

Clearwater, FL - \$700,000

FDEP Resilient Florida 2025 Implementation Grant
Elevating and Hardening Traffic Signal Cabinets for Hurricane,
Flooding, and Sea-Level Rise Impacts

Central Midlands COG, SC - \$8.7M

EPA CPRG Implementation Grant
Municipal Water Plant Solar + Smart Surfaces

Miccosukee Tribe, FL - \$14.9M

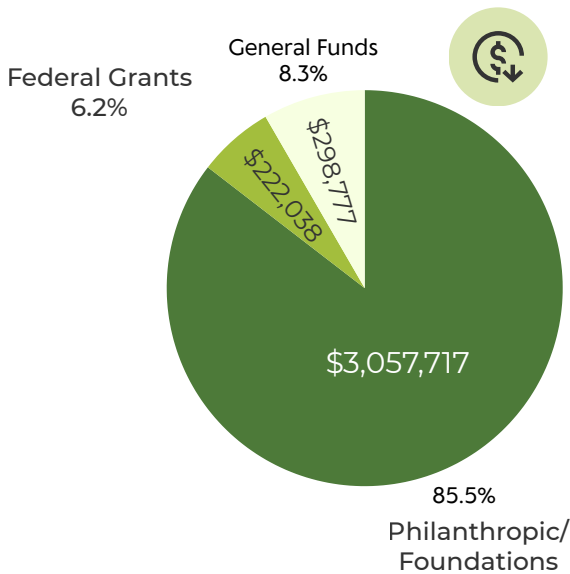
EPA CPRG Implementation Grant
Building Efficiency, Fleet Electrification + Solar

Atlanta, GA - TBD

State Hazard Mitigation Grant
Resilience Hub Development



Finances



Total budget

\$3.6M



\$.82

of every \$1 received is spent on mission-driven programs

Administrative & Fundraising

18%

\$649,833

\$2,919,633

Program
82%

Personnel

53.98%



Total personnel costs, including fringe (typical for nonprofits with minimal pass-through funding)

23.20%

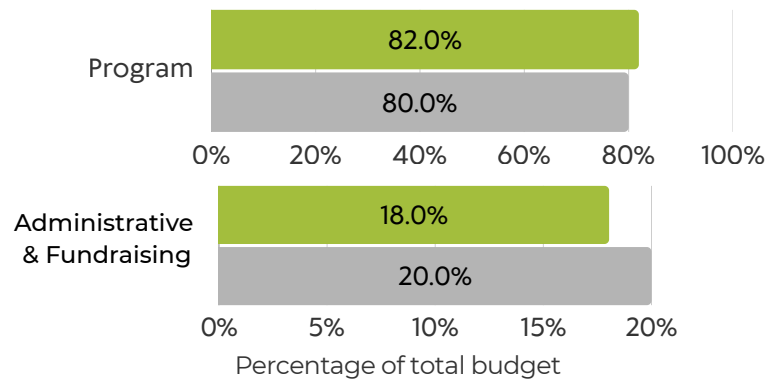


FY26 cumulative fringe benefit rate across staff (avg. for nonprofits is 30%)

How we stack up

SSDN

Nonprofit Benchmark



Improvements to grant requests

FY25

FY26

\$85K → \$136K

Annual Meeting grant support

FY25

FY26

~\$130K → ~\$307K

Increased overhead support

Looking Forward: 2026 and Beyond

Charting SSDN's Next Chapter

At the beginning of 2026, SSDN's Board and staff began laying the groundwork for the organization's next strategic plan, which will be finalized in mid-2027. The goal of this strategic planning process is to prepare SSDN to grow with the network, allow us to provide services that meaningfully meet member needs, drive innovation, and position the Southeast as a leader in resilience and sustainability.

Strategic Planning

Through a combination of member, board, staff, and partner engagement, we'll work to understand where we've had the greatest impact and where we can deepen our service to members. The result will be a plan grounded in both ambition and accountability: one that stays true to our member-driven mission while positioning us to meet emerging challenges and opportunities nimbly. Member service will remain at the core of our work, and we will be guided by the following strategic priorities:

- **Model Leadership in the Southeast and Nationally:** SSDN is a model organization for advancing local climate and resilience work both in the Southeast as well as nationally.
- **Deepen Member Services:** We will deepen our core services to members, which is the backbone of everything we do at SSDN. This includes intentional technical assistance, peer to peer learning, policy engagement support, and more.
- **Strengthen Organizational Capacity:** Investments in internal organizational infrastructure, processes, and staff development will ensure SSDN remains an organization ready to respond to member needs, develop innovative projects and solutions, retain talented and dedicated staff, and absorb large investments from funders.
- **Diversify Funding and Partnerships:** Continuing to diversify our revenue streams and partnerships is a sign of organizational maturity. We will foster relationships with funders and partners that will allow us to continue providing high quality member services and develop creative solutions together.

What's Next

Over the next year, we'll develop and roll out SSDN's new strategic plan, SSDN 3.0, as the organizing frame for the network's next chapter. "While SSDN 3.0 signals the beginning of a new chapter for our organization and network, we remain committed to our north star of service to our members, and look forward to co-creating innovative leadership in the Southeast with our members and partners!" - Rob Phocas, SSDN executive director.



Connect with Us



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