

Morris and Saerbeck

The climate-smart municipality “Klimakommune Saerbeck” has a population of 7,200 and is in the heart of the Münsterland area in North Rhine-Westphalia. It has been pursuing climate protection measures and the energy transition (Energiewende) for ten years. Today the municipality generates more electricity from wind, solar, and biomass than it needs (450% in 2018). The goal is to reach CO2 neutrality by 2030.

The municipality has received many awards for its engagement, including Germany’s sustainability award “Deutscher Nachhaltigkeitspreis and When the designation as a “NRW Klimakommune der Zukunft” (NRW Climate-Smart Municipality for the Future) in 2009. Current work includes research on battery storage in collaboration with FH Münster Applied University and research on electro- and hydrogenmobility.

Like Saerbeck, Morris is also home to a well known university – the University of Minnesota, Morris (UMM) and U of M West Central Research and Outreach Center – and is making progress towards climate goals.

Morris’ participation in Climate Smart Municipalities has led to the adoption of a Sustainability Strategic Plan, setting goals in the areas of energy, transportation, waste and education. In the Morris area, you can visit two 1.65 MW wind turbines, biomass gasification, solar PV systems and solar farms, solar thermal systems, anaerobic digestion, green buildings, and more. In 2017, the City of Morris was awarded the Minnesota Clean Energy Community Award, and in 2021, Morris was designated as a Level 4 community in the GreenStep Cities program and obtained recognition as a SolSmart Silver city. 113kWac of solar PV is being installed on four municipal buildings and the City has worked with the Morris Area Schools and Morris Transit to obtain three electric buses for student and public use. It will be exciting to see what else comes from the partnership between Morris and Saerbeck.



Above, one of the seven turbines at the Saerbeck Bioenergie Park.

Far right, Dr. Tobias Lehberg welcomes the delegation from Minnesota to the Saerbeck Bioenergie Park.



Commissioner Grace Arnold (R) signs Saerbeck’s Golden Book with Dr. Tobias Lehberg, the Mayor of Saerbeck (L).

Deutsche Perspektive

Dr. Tobias Lehberg, the Mayor of Saerbeck

Q: Today we are touring the Bioenergie Park. Why is this an exciting place?

A: Because the Bioenergie Park has undergone an incredible change, from a place of military energy, so to speak – and this also means of destructive energy – and it has now been turned to a place which is used for peaceful purposes. For civilian purposes. Eventually, I think, energy supply is important for the peaceful coexistence of people. I think that this is one of the special features, special characteristics of this place.

Q: You are the new Mayor of Saerbeck. The IPCC report indicates that we all need to be more ambitious and faster in achieving climate goals. You are clearly doing a lot in Saerbeck, but what is the next project that will help you pick up the pace that you’re most excited about?

A: Well, even if we have already made a great deal of progress, it is still true that we have not made enough progress. Above in the fields and heat and transport. Our next major project will be the heat sector. That is we have two new residential areas – two new housing estates – and there we are planning to install a system of the so called ‘cold district heating’, which means that we have a district heating system there, which is fully based on renewable energy. This would be a major step forward. That is if we are to get the political majority on the Municipal

Council. That is, we can then base the heat supply in these two new housing estates which are very large, as far as we are concerned—that is, we want to make these very climate friendly, and if possible, with hardly any CO2 emissions.

Q: What do you like about working with the Minnesotans?

A: First of all, I like the uncomplicated character of our cooperation, of our work together. Before this first meeting, I have been able to only attend online meetings but even there, after some online meetings, there was a very high level of trust, mutual trust, because we have realized we are being faced with the same problems. On both sides so to speak, we are trying to find solutions. We can learn a lot from Minnesota, Minnesota can learn from Saerbeck, it’s not a one-way street. Yeah, that is what I really enjoyed most in the work with the Minnesotans.





The old military munitions bunkers at the Bioenergie Park have been repurposed to support and cool the solar arrays.

Inspiration and Aspiration

Chris Watkins, Sustainability Project Coordinator for the City of Morris, sees opportunities in education



Chris Watkins

Q: We are visiting the Bioenergie Park in Saerbeck today. What are you seeing that is impressive and captures your imagination?

A: The thing that most captured my imagination when I think about the potential for impact on the future was the school that they run out of the Bioenergie Park where they bring in -- I think they said over 220 classes a

year -- and they have a full staff of teachers that teach climate sensitive topics and technical information at a level kids of all different ages can understand. It really prepares them to be able to tackle these important problems in the future.

Q: What are you learning, specifically about this educational opportunity, that you think people in Morris will benefit from?

A: I think the fact that they're making it international in scope and really trying to reach out and establish partnerships in many different nations. We've worked a little bit with [Saerbeck] in the past, in Morris, doing some interchange. They also have -- I believe it was Japan and a couple other countries -- have been sending students there for workshops. And I think that is a model we can really look to leverage in Morris to raise awareness of these concepts, because a lot of times, energy is something that's taken for granted by people until the lights don't turn on when you hit the switch, but, you know, to get to get the full background of how we relate to energy, how energy relates to the environment, and the impacts. That's something that you can never start teaching too soon. I think that's something we could do very well.

Q: What is valuable about being here in person, seeing these programs and being able to talk with your partners in Saerbeck? What would be lost if you were not able to be here?

A: Throughout COVID, we were trying to convince ourselves that we can move to zoom and not really notice a difference. We've been meeting with our Saerbeck partners and Climate Smart people for the past year, every couple months; but, you

“How we relate to energy, how energy relates to the environment, and the impacts. That’s something you can never start teaching too soon.”

- Chris Watkins

know, there's so much that you can gain by just the impromptu conversations that go on in between scheduled events, you have more time to draw out concepts and get more explanation on things. That's really impossible to do in a zoom meeting. Unless you have like a breakout, and no one does that. Also, this is my first time here. So, prior to coming here, I'd look up pictures of the Bioenergie Park there's not that many and the internet, which is strange, I've only seen like three, so you know, to be able to walk around and actually sense the scale of the tower above you and the endless row of solar panels and walk into one bunker that's been turned into an art gallery. You know, it's just such an immersive experience that makes it a lot more beneficial, triggers more thoughts in your head, and spurs more conversation.