

“Sustainable Tompkins”: Solving Today’s Problems with the Future in Mind

*An invitation from the
“Sustainable Tompkins” Coordinating Committee¹*

Sharing the Long View

Most residents of Tompkins County readily celebrate its diverse culture and pleasing landscape, and many have eschewed careers elsewhere in favor of the quality of life found here. But despite the good efforts of many citizens, the fabric of amenities and necessities that make up that high quality of life is increasingly stretched and torn. Adverse global trends such as population growth and climate change loom on the horizon, while complex cultural forces create intensifying social and economic inequities along with unhealthy consumption and lifestyle patterns. A recent local survey for the Tompkins County United Way identified critical problems in employment, health care, child care, housing, and poverty in the county. Budget difficulties plague every level of government, threatening homeowners and businesses with unmanageable tax increases. Whatever else we might call our current situation, it is not sustainable.

And yet, we have good cause for optimism. First, we are not alone in confronting these complex problems. Hundreds of other communities are actively searching for ways to evolve toward sustainable patterns of development, and we can learn from their efforts. There are solutions available and we have the necessary ingenuity and competence to adapt them to our circumstances. The City of Ithaca and its surrounding towns have a national reputation as an enclave for social, economic, and environmental innovation. Besides our region’s generous natural capital of forests, farms and lakes, we have an abundance of social capital assets such as our educated workforce and high level of civic engagement. People here care deeply about environmental stewardship, social justice, and a stable local economy, and there are dozens of active organizations dedicated to worthy causes. Most importantly, both community leaders and residents share an ethic of responsible planning for the future of Tompkins County and the Finger Lakes Region.

This does not mean that we are concretely addressing the issue of sustainability. A sustainable culture would be one in which human needs are addressed from a long-term, systemic perspective so that stewardship of natural resources is linked to an economic structure that safeguards the well being of *all* members of a community. Many of the plans and strategies of our local governments and civic organizations already incorporate some principles of sustainable development. For example, the county’s new Vital Communities Initiative reflects the perspective of a very informed citizenry that understands the need for substantial change in the design of community infrastructures. But despite the good progress of the past decade, we believe there is much to be gained by using the decision-making framework of sustainability as a shared context for solving today’s problems while simultaneously building the infrastructure of a sustainable future.

Sustainability is systemic. It starts from acknowledging that things are interconnected in space and time. Sustainability is based upon economic security, through reinvestment of resources in the local economy and a dynamic, diverse and financially viable economic base. But sustainability is also based upon ecological integrity where use of renewable resources is no faster than their rate of renewal, and waste and pollution are minimized. The third key to sustainability is often overlooked, but remains the essential ingredient for ongoing success: social well being and the empowerment and responsibility of individuals to participate in decisions that affect their lives. This aspect may prove the most challenging for us as we try to build a community spirit that creates a sense of

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belonging to a place – a spirit that inspires us to care for those in need while instilling a willingness in everyone to be accountable for their actions. Though challenging in an era of intense strain from the globalization of markets, a community that invests in its own natural and social capital will be more likely to enjoy economic stability.

Our progress toward sustainability will involve weaving new relationships that give strength and resilience to the fabric of community. More than just bike paths and solar panels, a sustainable culture will require the unraveling of complex patterns of resource exploitation and social hierarchies and replacing them with new interwoven initiatives that create adequate livelihoods for county residents without harming either our natural resources or the rights of future generations. A key attribute of sustainability is the integration of the values of social justice and stewardship with those of material comfort and individual freedom. Sustainability also will involve a gradual shift in social concepts of “the good life.” This is challenging, difficult work and will require a significant transformation of social and cultural norms – including our approach to problem solving. As author Will Keepin wrote:

“We are urgently called to action in two distinct capacities: to serve as hospice workers to a dying culture and to serve as midwives to an emerging culture. We must cultivate the requisite compassion to skillfully bear the grief and loss associated with the passing of the material and ecological excesses of twentieth-century society, while bringing into existence a new culture, which requires new forms of organization and ecological communities and unprecedented forms of harmony between diverse peoples. These two tasks are required simultaneously.”

Though the vision of a sustainable culture may beckon us, the work of transformation can be daunting. Where do we start? How can we sketch out a path that takes us from our immediate situation toward this goal of a just and sustainable society? We know the work of transformation requires systemic analysis and widespread adoption of the goals of sustainability. This will require a new model of partnership and broadly shared leadership and accountability. Thus, we believe we should begin by asking local leaders to help explore the challenge of co-creating a sustainable future for our community. Our proposal is to start a civic conversation that engages the knowledge, skill, and passion of Tompkins County’s innovators and organizational leaders in creating a vision of a sustainable community as well as an action plan for beginning the process of integrating environmental, social, and economic well being.

<p>“Leave the world better than you found it, take no more than you need, try not to harm life or the environment, make amends if you do.”</p>	<p>Paul Hawken</p>
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Background

Ithaca College has recently intensified its efforts to imbed principles of sustainability into its curriculum and institutional management, and as part of its mission of civic engagement has initiated a community dialogue on solving the challenges of sustainable development. In September, Ithaca College in cooperation with the City of Ithaca Planning Department and EcoVillage of Ithaca, hosted a public workshop on sustainable management systems led by Ed Quevedo, director of Environmental Management and Sustainability Programs for WSP Environmental, Inc. Over 40 representatives of local businesses, governments, civic organizations, and educational institutions gathered for this event at the City Council chambers in City Hall to learn more about WSP’s work within Sonoma County, California and the feasibility of replicating a similar endeavor within Tompkins County. In this unprecedented forum, these representatives worked jointly to articulate their perception of the challenges to sustainability in this region.

In response to a follow-up survey Ithaca College sent out to that session’s attendees to gauge their interest in further exploration of regional sustainability management, many individuals and entity representatives expressed positive interest in continuing a dialogue and to devoting time and resources to the endeavor. Our committee

recognizes that we have a tremendous opportunity at hand to nurture the creation of a new form of community-based problem solving based in the long-term, systemic approach of sustainability.

“It is within communities that people can most easily bring diverse interests together, identify and agree on goals for positive change, and organize for responsive action. While the challenges facing the nation are difficult to resolve at any level of government, local communities offer people the greatest opportunity to meet face to face to fashion a shared commitment to a sustainable future. The role of local communities is becoming increasingly important as the United States, and much of the rest of the world, moves toward more decentralized decision making.”

-The President’s Council on Sustainable Development, 1996

Proposed Activities

We have been working to identify a cost-effective, high-leverage plan for launching a *Sustainable Tompkins* program during the spring of 2004. We want to serve as conveners of a civic dialogue on regional sustainability, while simultaneously incubating a means for local leaders to become co-creators of integrated, collaborative projects dedicated to the social, environmental, and economic stewardship of our community. Though we will do our best to create a venue for developing a partnership for leadership on sustainability, the outcomes of the project will be determined by the energy and vision of the community’s leaders.

We want to explore basic “lifeboat-building” activities that improve our ability to provide our own food, shelter, and energy from resources in the Finger Lakes Region. We want to examine opportunities for changing our consumption patterns through waste minimization, pollution prevention, and energy conservation in our homes, businesses, and public facilities – while developing new business opportunities such as recycling-based manufacturing. We want to venture into the complexities of redesigning our infrastructure so that it serves our long-term needs. We want to understand how we might improve quality of life for those needing support services while reducing long-term demand for expensive interventions. And we want to delve into the process of social change to understand how we might take a systemic approach to solving common problems such as the costs of health care.

The planned format of this initiative would involve four phases: review and synthesis of earlier local efforts, study circles with community leaders, individual in-depth interviews with potential funders and elected officials, and neighborhood “sustainability salons” to engage interested citizens.

Our goals are to:

- identify previous programs and studies concerned with the county’s social, economic and environmental issues and look for ways to integrate current efforts around principles of sustainability
- assess the level of community interest in creating and implementing sustainable practices
- help participants explore a shared vision of what regional sustainability looks like
- help participants identify what needs to be done to head toward regional sustainability
- identify specific, short-term, concrete steps to establish credibility and momentum for a “*Sustainable Tompkins*” initiative

Our first step will be to collaborate with Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County and EcoVillage at Ithaca to compile studies from the past decade by local organizations that have addressed county environmental, social welfare, or economic development issues. We begin with a synthesis of earlier efforts for several reasons: outreach efforts to identify sources of earlier visioning and issue analyses will aid the process of recruiting participants for the study circles from a wide diversity of community leaders; we want to acknowledge the contributions of others toward problem solving in the realm of sustainability; study circle participants will obtain a better understanding of the ongoing problems in the county by learning of earlier efforts; participants can use a summary of the reports to facilitate identification of connections between critical issues and help prioritize the next steps we should

undertake. Having a solid understanding of the critical issues of the recent past will help us identify new systemic approaches to solving problems in the context of long-term stewardship, financial stability, and human well being.

The next phase will be to recruit community leaders from across the county and from a broad range of sectors to come together for a series of meetings on sustainability in a study circle format. Study circles help create a sense of community and provide a setting for collective “depth” conversations to explore issues and co-create visions for the future. They can help build a sense of shared ownership and public commitment to the community’s vision.

Study circles have their roots in early New England town meetings and the Chautauqua movement of the late 19th century. They are being used across the globe to help citizens grapple with social or political issues in a democratic, nonpartisan, and collaborative way. Meeting in small groups of five to fifteen people, study circles have multiple benefits which encourage awareness and cultural change. The primary benefit is the depth of the experience. They provide a means for immersion in a topic that greatly exceeds in quantity and quality the typical knowledge gains from mass media. Equally important to fueling motivation for change are the internalization and ownership of ideas that result from group discussions, and the broadening of perspective that comes from deep and generous listening to other points of view. Circles can also serve as support groups for initiating individual changes that may diverge from cultural norms. In this way, circle members become a new reference group with which to compare one’s behavior. Since they are participatory democracy in action, study circles also foster citizenship and inspire advocacy and action as members become more informed and confident about what steps to take.

We propose the following methodology for the circles:

- using community referencing techniques, identify 75 community leaders from a variety of sectors and interest groups
- assign recruits to participate in one of five circles on the following topics:
 1. sustainable business development
 2. renewable energy and responsible construction
 3. infrastructure design for a sustainable community
 4. systems for community well being
 5. moving toward a sustainable culture
- each circle will meet three times, fortnightly, for 2.5 hours: circles will progress from exploring the dimensions of sustainability to conceptualizing transformation to identification of action steps.
- though each circle will have a particular focus, all groups will be encouraged to think holistically and identify linkages, and participants will come from several backgrounds to stimulate cross-fertilization of ideas.
- short readings will be assigned in advance of each circle to provide background and stimulate discussion.
- individual circle meetings will culminate in a final circle summit where the five groups will share their visions and ideas for how to proceed.

Some of the possible discussion topics for the circles include the following: The *sustainable business development* circle will explore how to improve the performance of existing businesses around their “triple bottom line” of environmental, social, and economic performance. This group will also look at ways to improve local purchasing, the capture of energy, material, and waste streams, and our options for creating new enterprises associated with sustainable economic development. The *renewable energy and responsible construction* circle will examine the feasibility of developing alternative regional sources of energy, and opportunities for energy conservation and recycling of resources in new and older construction. The *infrastructure design for a sustainable community* circle will discuss how to optimize and integrate transportation networks, utility corridors, housing, and commercial enterprises while preserving open space, agricultural resources, and critical habitats. This group will also consider how to improve intermunicipal planning and examine the barriers (legal, social, economic) to adopting development patterns more conducive to sustainable communities.

The remaining two circles will look more closely at the human dimensions of sustainable community design. In *systems for community well being*, circle participants will consider local demographic trends in income, population age structure, and workforce composition; and anticipate infrastructure design elements that would

reduce future vulnerabilities. They will also discuss how to integrate health care and disease prevention into the design of our communities, and how workforce issues around living wages, affordable housing, health care and continuing education can be addressed systemically. The *moving toward a sustainable culture* circle will focus on the process of social change, exploring the social and psychological barriers to adopting sustainable lifestyles and business practices. This group will also share their experiences in using images, metaphors, and conceptual frameworks to create transformative experiences that motivate citizens to adopt new styles of living.

As word spreads about the study circles for community leaders, we anticipate requests from other interested citizens to be included in any discussions around sustainability issues. To answer this anticipated demand and to lay the groundwork for a truly democratic process, we propose to organize a small number of neighborhood-based “sustainability salons” modeled on the Conversation Cafés that have been established in numerous U.S. cities since 9/11 (see www.conversationcafe.org).

Similar to a study circle in format and process, these talking circles are hosted, drop-in conversations in neighborhood cafes or restaurants. Anyone may attend and responsibilities for facilitating discussion are shared by the group. A minimal set of agreements around acceptance, listening, sincerity, and brevity, along with a simple process for shared dialogue create a setting for a rich exploration of substantial social issues. Hosts for four salons will be recruited and trained, and local media used to advertise the events. Volunteers will develop a series of articles on sustainability for publication in a local paper. These articles will serve as springboards for discussion in the salons, as well as provide an introduction to sustainability issues for the general public. As interest grows, the salons can become self-perpetuating and additional circles can be established in other neighborhoods.

We also anticipate needing to conduct several in-depth personal interviews with key leaders, potential funders, and major partners that may be unable to participate in the study circles. For example, we will contact the offices of our federal and state representatives to acquaint them with the project and explore government funding sources for action steps identified by the study circles.

The outcomes of the study circles and individual interviews will be summarized in a feasibility study report to project sponsors and participants. This final report will:

- summarize the discussions of the circles and interviews
- assess community capacity for creating an ongoing collaboration
- describe the next steps identified by the participants
- offer recommendations for the pursuit of additional resources
- identify potential major donors and supporters
- provide substantial background material for grant proposals and funding requests by participants

The final report will include an assessment of the resources that already exist at the city, town and county levels, a summary of the consensus that comes out of the study circles vis-à-vis shared interests and visions, and a proposal of what direction the Sustainable Tompkins initiative might take in the near future.

“It would be unfortunate if sustainability gets cast as a thing we do or a technique we use rather than a way we think and a way we choose to live.”

Gary Lawrence, Univ. of Washington Center for Sustainable Communities

Schedule

January and February will be used to compile and synthesize earlier studies, identify and recruit the participants, organize the study circles and sustainability salons, and develop the reading materials, and circle agendas. In March and April, the circles will occur twice a week over six weeks (each circle meeting every other week), with a circle summit in the seventh week. The sustainability salons will be launched in the same time

period. In May and June, individual interviews will be arranged for key opinion leaders and results of the overall project compiled into a summary report.

The study circles will be held fortnightly at Cooperative Extension on Willow Avenue from 7:00-9:30 pm on Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday evenings, beginning in mid March. Specific dates will be established after collating the schedules of the participants. The circle summit will be held in the last week of April. A commitment to attend 7.5 hours of the circle gatherings and to read a small number of handouts as guides for discussion is required of attendees. The Circle Summit will be from 5:00-9:30 pm and include a dinner provided for participants.

On April 6, Ithaca College will be hosting a regional sustainability conference for community leaders and regional colleges. Workshop leaders will include corporations pursuing sustainable business practices (Nike, Hewlett Packard, Bristol Myers Squibb, DuPont), faculty leaders of academic sustainability efforts, and leaders of regional sustainability initiatives in Austin, Vancouver, and San Francisco. Keynote speakers will include the developer of the "ecological footprint" metric, the head of the World Bank's sustainable development network, and the designer charged with integrating sustainable design into the redevelopment of lower Manhattan. Study circle participants will be encouraged to attend this first regional summit to interact directly with leaders in business, academics, and government that are attempting the practice of thinking and living sustainably.

"...many believe that this is a movement that has the potential to provide effective responses to community disintegration, economic decline, and environmental degradation.... The sustainable community movement addresses citizens' central concerns and values, looks to the future, strengthens a community's ability to deal with change, develops processes for finding common ground, strives to benefit all members of the community, [and] emphasizes citizen involvement and institutional accountability."

- from a special report to The Johnson Foundation by Janet Maughan

Summary

Communities around the country are awakening to the need to search for new ways of organizing economic and social life. As part of its mission to share the responsibilities of citizenship and service in the local and global community, Ithaca College is sponsoring an initiative for the residents of Tompkins County to come together and examine the ongoing challenge of solving the complex issues of sustainable development. The Park Foundation, Alternatives Federal Credit Union, and HOLT Architects have also pledged their support. We are asking leaders within the regional community to help us take a first step toward redesigning the fabric of our lives together by joining us in this exploration of sustainability as a unifying theme for our work together.