

Sustainable Tompkins Phase I: a Community Conversation on the Challenge of Sustainable Development

Gay Nicholson
Program Coordinator

Across the globe, organizations and communities have been exploring application of the principles of sustainability to solve complex problems and safeguard the future. With an emphasis on integrating social, economic, and environmental needs, the conceptual framework for pursuing sustainability puts the focus on understanding the interconnectedness of all things in space and time – and making decisions accordingly.

In September of 2003, Ithaca College hosted a community workshop at City Hall on sustainable management systems as part of its commitment to civic engagement and its own efforts to imbed sustainability into its curriculum and institutions. Workshop participants from the business, government, and nonprofit sectors expressed interest in further exploration of how the Tompkins County community might use the lens of sustainability to coordinate current efforts and initiate new approaches for solving local problems.

[1]

A six-month feasibility study was launched by a coordinating committee to bring community leaders and innovators together to explore their vision for sustainability in Tompkins County, and identify some specific action steps for sustainable community development. Led by Ithaca College, Park Foundation and Cornell University, funding support was provided by local

[2]

institutions and businesses. Using a “community conversation” model of engagement, the project offered study circles and coffeehouse salons as a means for residents to examine a wide range of topics related to sustainability.

Study circles help create a sense of community and provide a setting for “depth conversations” on complex issues. Using community referencing techniques, 149 leaders from a broad range of sectors and interests were invited to participate in five study circles covering various aspects of

[3]

sustainability. Eighty people signed up to participate, choosing among the topics of Renewable Energy and Responsible Construction, Sustainable Regional Economies, Infrastructure Design for Sustainable Communities, Systems for Community Well Being, and Moving Toward a Sustainable Culture.

Each circle met three times over six weeks in March and April of 2004. The first meeting was used to explore attributes of sustainability and how those might be expressed in Tompkins

County. At the second meeting, participants discussed their reactions to a summary paper written by the project coordinator on recent county studies of economic, social, and environmental issues, [4]

and worked together to create a more systemic understanding of one of the most problematic or unsustainable trends within their area of study (e.g. the affordable housing crisis or the increasing fragmentation of society). The final session was used to develop three project proposals that circle members believed to be important in achieving greater sustainability in Tompkins County.

Five “sustainability salons” were initiated at the end of March, running for six consecutive weeks. These hosted, “drop in” public gatherings were modeled on the Conversation Cafes that have been organized in many cities after the September 11 attacks (see conversationcafe.org for details). Volunteers and student assistants were recruited to welcome visitors for an evening of conversation on various topics of sustainability at restaurants in South Lansing (Rogues Harbor) and Trumansburg (Simply Red Bistro), and at coffeehouses in Ithaca (Gimme, Juna’s, and Wownet). A simultaneous series of newspaper articles written by volunteers on topics similar to those covered by the study circles served as a “jumping off place” for each week’s discussion. Average attendance at the 30 salon sessions was 8.2 people with a range of 2-18. Summaries of most salon discussions were posted on a local listserv devoted to the topic of sustainability.

Significant media attention to the feasibility study was generated through press releases, the six-week op-ed series on sustainability, feature articles and editorials in several local papers, and appearances on local talk radio shows. The project was also featured at a regional conference on sustainability held at Ithaca College in early April.

The feasibility study culminated with a ‘Circle Summit’ held on April 29, 2004. About 80 circle participants, salon hosts, student assistants, coordinating committee members, sponsors, volunteer writers, and invited guests (including the mayor of Ithaca, the chair of the county legislature, and other elected officials) were able to attend. The fifteen project proposals from the circles and highlights of the salon conversations were exhibited on display boards for an initial

[5]

period of review and written comment by attendees. Two additional projects were spontaneously added by participants. Following dinner and opening remarks by the organizers, volunteer facilitators invited the group to indicate their top three choices among the project proposals in terms of feasibility, importance, and early success. Attendees were then invited to group the projects into related clusters as needed and form “affinity groups” of those interested in working on developing the projects further. Nine project teams formed around the 17 proposals

[6]

with 64 attendees signing up to participate on the teams. The evening concluded with a facilitated discussion on the options for how and whether to proceed with developing an ongoing

organizational entity to support the work of the project teams.

When the feasibility study was initially designed by the consultant, Gay Nicholson, in October, 2003, it was premised upon the need to explore the resonance of sustainability as a unifying theme for county residents. Although the follow-up survey from the September, 2003 workshop indicated interest in the topic, the diversity of agendas and hesitancy to commit resources noted in the survey responses intimated a need to design a project that was exploratory, yet offered the opportunity for taking action. As the project expanded to include more circles and salons, and additional community representatives were recruited to the coordinating committee, organizers began to realize the potency of the sustainability message for listeners. By the time the circles and salons were launched in March, media interest and the energy of the participants had pushed the set of operating assumptions for the project beyond that of typical feasibility studies into the reality of launching a local community sustainability initiative. The excitement and vitality of the Circle Summit confirmed that this metamorphosis had been a success.

The Sustainable Tompkins Coordinating Committee opened its membership to all participants, and the May and June monthly meetings were used to refine a mission statement and establish temporary working groups to investigate organizational options, funding sources, and processes for expanding and diversifying participation. Two standing committees were formed to handle outreach and administrative details. Four of the project teams began regular meetings, using the summer months to get acquainted and explore the possibilities for action within their areas of interest. By late July, a number of proposed outreach and education activities for the coming year had been developed and the coordinating committee began discussions on what kinds of structure and process would be needed to guide the efforts of such a large and diverse coalition of organizations and individuals.

A satisfying momentum for the establishment of Sustainable Tompkins has been achieved, but despite the rapid evolution of the project from short-term feasibility study to emerging social movement, the group knows it will face significant challenges in the next phase of its development. Some of these are common to any start-up civic organization: researching and debating organizational infrastructure needs, engaging volunteers, fundraising, and developing outreach materials. But some of the challenges will be unique because of the nature of sustainable development and because of the aspiration of members to create an organization that demonstrates through its own internal processes the principles and practices believed necessary to create a sustainable society.

Although there were many expressions of gratitude by the salon and circle participants for the chance to connect with others who share their concerns, the coordinating committee has been faced with the pragmatic task of managing the interests, activities, and agendas of a large and diverse group. Attempts by organizations to address complexity at a holistic level typically run

into multiple friction points as individuals are challenged to work across disciplines, social identities, and turf boundaries. Discomfort and fear over the possibility of Sustainable Tompkins becoming a divisive force offering an alternative development agenda; worry that it would be taken over by either elites or extremists; concern over its ability to broaden its inclusion zone to attract more rural, minority or low-income participants; and a simultaneous fear that participation would be uncomfortable for the business class were all expressed during the first phase.

The voicing of these concerns was met with acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the issues raised and the promise to work towards a relationship structure based upon partnership, inclusion, shared leadership, and mutual accountability. To achieve that will require careful attention to the culture of the organization as it develops. It may turn out that the most critical factor in the long-term success of Sustainable Tompkins will be the capacity of the participants to be flexible, transparent, and tolerant. Funding for worthwhile projects is available from local, state, and national sources. The skills and expertise of Sustainable Tompkins participants are adequate for undertaking a variety of initiatives. The challenge of the next phase will be to co-create an organization that is entrepreneurial, yet collaborative; multifaceted, yet synergistic; efficient, yet comprehensive. Sustainability offers a very large umbrella over the common ground of our shared future. Sustainable Tompkins hopes to provide the hub and spokes for a community sustainability movement that protects the long-term well-being of our region.

[1]

Gay Nicholson, Sustainable Tompkins Project Coordinator; Bill Myers, Sustainable Tompkins Coordinating Committee Chair, *Alternatives Federal Credit Union*; Martha Armstrong, *Tompkins County Area Development*; Marlene Barken, *Business School, Ithaca College*; Fred Bonn, *Tompkins County Chamber of Commerce*; Katie Borgella, *Tompkins County Planning Department*; Eric Clay, *First Congregational Church*; Mark Darling, *Resource and Environmental Management Steering Committee, Ithaca College*; George Ferrari, *Catholic Charities*; Andrew Gil, *HOLT Architects*; Steve Nicholson, *Tompkins County Environmental Management Council*; Ken Schlather, *Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County*; Elan Shapiro, *EcoVillage at Ithaca*; Thys Van Cort, *City of Ithaca Planning and Development Department*.

[2]

Sponsors included Alternatives Federal Credit Union, Community Foundation of Tompkins County, Cornell University, Ithaca Bakery, Ithaca College, Ithaca College Environmental Society, HOLT Architects, Money with a Mission, Park Foundation, and Tompkins Trust Company.

[3]

Circle members represented a wide variety of sectors including architecture, arts, banking, clergy, counseling, construction, civic organizations, education, elected officials, environmental conservation, labor, planning, transportation, health care, social welfare, media, manufacturing, retail, farming, engineering, research, publishing, real estate, historic preservation, and technology.

[4]

See Appendix A, "County Overview for Circles".

[5]

See Appendix B, "Study Circle Project Proposals."

[6]

Project team titles: Coordinating Sustainability through Arts and Communication, Green Resource Hub, Healthy Generations, Sustainable Land Use Regulation and Planning, Local Production and Consumption, Center for Recycling and Economic Development, Interfaith Conversations on Well Being, Biodiesel Buses, and Student Outreach.