

Work for a 'Sustainable Tompkins'

A new community initiative, Sustainable Tompkins, has been launched in Tompkins County. Its aim is to consider what this region would be like if it were better designed to assure economic stability, social well being and the continued integrity of our ecosystems. Along with being a community-wide learning process, it encourages citizens to pool our abundant, but often dispersed, assets and come up with projects and partnerships that could move us in the direction of long-term community well being.

It is timely to a look at what sustainability is and what it can do for us in this era of soaring housing costs and property taxes, an overload on public services, increasing traffic congestion, deteriorating neighborhoods and urban infrastructure, and the threat to our countryside of unchecked sprawl.

Many elements of a sustainable Tompkins County are already in place in the many aspects of our lives here that are durable — nurturing and supportive of our most basic needs. You might sense this when you visit a waterfall or the lake or the Ithaca Festival — times when you may have a feeling of kinship and love for this talented, civic-minded community and this “gorgeous” region. You might feel it when shopping for local produce at the Farmer’s Market or when you run an errand on foot instead of in your car.

There are strong signs of sustainability in our pioneering local currency and community health funds and in the little-

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recognized “community councils” in every town where neighbors are working together on community issues, in a local on-line goods exchange and green building network, in the ways our underfunded community agencies are pooling resources, in businesses that are increasingly offering recycled or fair-trade product and in Ithaca College’s plans for an ecologically designed business school.

Sustainable Tompkins seeks to discover how the bounty of this vibrant community can become more affordable and accessible to all in ways that restore, rather than degrade, the ecosystems. But how to approach such a seemingly impossible task? Some of the characteristics of communities around the globe that are moving toward sustainability are:

■ Policies that support a shift from sprawl and auto-centered development to small-scale, mixed-use population centers that are pedestrian, bicycle and transit friendly.

■ Citizen empowerment to work together with their governments to find small-scale, bottom-up, local solutions.

■ Recognition that many aspects of modern life are

excessive and exhausting and that voluntary limits can be a source of relief and contentment.

■ A “no waste” attitude that is resourceful but not stingy.

■ A wish to reverse injustices and inequities that are consequences of a wasteful system that obscures the full costs of the things we consume.

■ Recognition that even well-meaning and successful actions — under our current society’s terms — can wear down the ecological and social fabric around us.

Sustainability is not an isolated issue or some good idea we can get around to later. It is interwoven with crucial elements of our society, such as jobs, housing and health. It’s not an environmentalist preoccupation but a common-sense set of energy and cost saving design strategies.

We have come to see sustainability as not only about complex global and technical issues but also about changing the patterns and quality of our lives. It’s about shifting from our increasingly fragmented and high-stress modes of daily living to gentler ones that favor

connections with family, friends, neighbors, and the beautiful places we live in.

Sustainable Tompkins is actively seeking out small-scale projects that demonstrate sustainability principles without needing major planning and funding. These projects may involve people cooperating together in fresh ways, linking information, skills and perspectives across previously separate organizations and disciplines.

To build on our democratic skills and understanding of complex issues, Tompkins is holding a series of “Sustainability Salons” over the next six weeks. Modeled on the “conversation cafes” that started on the West Coast, these salons will offer an opportunity to meet with others and talk about various aspects of sustainability. Each salon will have a host and will use a round-robin style of discourse to make sure everyone gets to speak.

The first week’s topic will be an exploration of the principles and practices of sustainability. Subsequent topics will be introduced on this page each week.

Sustainability is a long-term community planning and

redesign process that requires a broad base of citizen involvement to succeed. The salons are a way to foster that process. We invite you to drop in, meet like-minded — or maybe just curious — people, join the conversation, learn and exchange ideas.

Sustainable Tompkins has gained the support of Ithaca College, Cornell University, and various local foundations, businesses and organizations. Please join us in this important community initiative.

For more information, click on “Sustainable Tompkins” at www.ithaca.edu/sustainability.

Shapiro is a founder of the Sustainable Tompkins initiative. He lives in the Town of Ithaca.

This is the first of six weekly guest columns about the issue of sustainable building in Tompkins County. The remaining columns will appear on the Opinion Page on Mondays.

Sustainability Salons

■ *Rogues Harbor 2079 E. Shore Drive in Lansing from 5:30 p.m. to 7 p.m. on Mondays from March 29 through May 3.*

■ *Glimme Coffee, 506 W. State St., in the City of Ithaca, from 5:30 p.m. to 7 p.m. on Tuesdays from March 30 through May 4.*

■ *Junia’s on The Ithaca Commons from 5 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. on Wednesdays from March 31 through May 5.*

■ *Wow!Net Digital Cafe, 111 N. Aurora St., in the City of Ithaca from 7 p.m. through 8:30 p.m. on Thursdays from April 1 through May 6.*

■ *Simply Red Bistro, 53 E. Main St., Trumansburg, from 7:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. on Thursdays from April 1 through May 6.*