

Synopsis of Sustainability Forum

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During the “Sustainability Forum” held at IslandWood, attendees were asked to identify obstacles, potential solutions and signs of hope in developing an Island that is “carbon neutral” and thus “environmentally sustainable.” Identified obstacles and solutions were on both a personal and social level.

One of the major issues is that there are mindset constraints. People have “unsustainable” habits and habits are hard to break. This is especially true when breaking the habits means added inconvenience. It is much easier to drive than to bike, walk or take the bus. Sustainable living requires planning and awareness. In addition to the inconvenience is the mindset many of us have grown up with where “new is better” and so much emphasis is placed on buying, consuming and having material goods. As a result, we don’t “walk the walk”, and we don’t provide good examples for our children or others. In addition, sustainable living has short term costs, and everything is driven by money.

There are also specific challenges for Bainbridge Island. One is that the island is a bedroom community, which means no community. Most Islanders commute to Seattle so they, in a sense, live there. There is also a somewhat of a presumption of progressiveness. We may be less progressive than we really are. In addition, there are also problems related to having a comprehensive community wide plan that goes beyond individual behavior. For example, if there are too few bicycle paths, poor mass transit services or a lack of adequate recycling facilities, certain sustainable habits cannot be put into practice. One of the impediments to a comprehensive plan is that the city itself is broke, financed by an unsustainable tax system based on real estate development.

As for solutions to put Island residents on the path to sustainability, ideas were brought up that focused on both short term and long term. There were numerous ideas on the topic of energy conservation. These solutions included line drying clothes instead of machine drying, installation of a tank-less water heater, better insulation and installing solar panels on the south roof of the house. Other ideas focused more on lifestyles and education. These included attending energy conservation meetings, social networking for ideas, planting a garden rather than a lawn (edible landscape), educating oneself on how food goes from farm to table and shopping less but locally. On a long term basis, homes should be smaller and more attention given to sustainable designs. There were also exhortations to view sustainable living as a spiritual value and respect for the natural world.

Solutions on a more community wide basis included not only having a comprehensive plan, but they also focused on changing the character of the community. Comprehensive plans should not be introduced on a grand scale but introduced with attainable goals on the short term leading to a long term goal such as being “carbon neutral” by 2030. On the community character level, attention was paid to having a healthy business climate. This is why the “shop locally” solution was brought up. In order to attain a good business climate and to attract businesses, reliable information infrastructure needs to be in place as does a reliable power

supply. In addition, there needs to be an overhaul of the tax and regulatory structure on the Island.

We also need to avoid the “native vs. newcomer” hostility toward growth. There need to be an emphasis on handling economic and population growth correctly rather than trying to prevent it overall. As stated before, one of the biggest problems is the lack of community as the island has become a gentrified bedroom community. More jobs need to be created on the island because that would involve more people having a stake in the island’s future. In addition to creating more jobs on the island, attention also needs to be paid to keeping the job holders on the island as residents. Therefore, development of affordable housing was also seen as a potential solution on the road to sustainability.

Finally, it was asked if there were signs of hope that sustainability was achievable. The fact that there was a forum like this hosted by the business community was a hopeful sign. Others pointed out that local governments, school districts and the military are “getting it.” Such examples included the solar panels on Sakai Middle School as well as strong interest in recycling and energy conservation. It was also brought up that the next generation “knows it and lives it.” Someone stated that we have a local “brain trust/ heart trust.” There at last seems to be a cheerful “no alternatives” attitude on the topic of sustainable living.