

A Vision of a Happy, Sustainable St. John's

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The October 2010 Happy City Workshop demonstrated that there are many talented individuals in St. John's that aspire to see the city working towards becoming sustainable and would like to contribute to the process. This will bring about the creation of a healthy and happy future city.

It has been suggested that the best way for a city to become sustainable is to establish an Office of Sustainable Development (OSD) that would coordinate activities with governmental departments and non-governmental organizations (Saha and Paterson, 2008) and could solicit input from the public. An OSD would enable all citizens to adopt sustainable lifestyles and would introduce sustainable functionality into all systems connected with the city (such as food supply, town planning, transportation and public transit, diversified energy, water conservation, and integrated wastes management, to name a few).

To give an example of what might be done, focusing on the development of an efficient public transportation system could lead to an increase in ridership, could make it possible to extend the bus routes to outlying communities, and could allow for the introduction of express busses at certain times or to certain locations (such as the airport). The use of cleaner and quieter hybrid or electric busses in the future would also make the system more attractive. In addition, if some signalized intersections could be converted into simple, well-designed roundabouts this could be safer, more energy efficient, and more aesthetically pleasing.

With a progressive public transportation system in place, fewer automobiles would be necessary, some streets could be eliminated or become one way and extra road space could be converted into green spaces with trees and gardens, foot and bicycle paths, outdoor cafés (Buettner, 2010), farmers' and other markets, and other public venues. These changes would improve adjacency and safety and make walking and bicycling more convenient. Other benefits could include a greater sense of community, reduced crime, improved health and fitness of residents, increased tourism, reduced greenhouse gas emissions, reduced flooding, increased biodiversity and increased wildlife habitat.

To complement the improvements in transportation, the OSD could encourage high density construction, stipulate urban boundaries to growth, introduce water fees and metering, and update building codes (to encourage green roofs, or sloped roofs with gutters for harvesting rainwater that could be used for watering parks, washing roads and controlling dust).

The role of the OSD would include educating the public on how to make sustainable choices and promoting artistic, musical, cultural, social, and athletic events, crafts and trades, and an appreciation for nature so that these activities and occupations could gradually come to replace and limit more materialistic and environmentally damaging pursuits (Buettner, 2010).

Goals to be accomplished over time would have to be set and progress could be measured by employing some common sustainability indicators such as density of urban population, percentage users of mass transit, waste sent to landfill, annual per capita water consumption, green space per 1000 inhabitants, and ecological footprint, among others (Tanguay et al., 2010). Currently, an acceptable global average ecological footprint per person is 1.8 hectares compared to 4.9 hectares in Europe and 9.2 hectares in the United States (Seyfang, 2006).

Fortunately, there is a growing realization that increased income, beyond a certain level, does not bring increased happiness, and that it is preferable to strive to improve the “gross national happiness” (GNH) rather than the GDP (Conley, 2010). In Denmark where small differences in income exist between the richest and the poorest and everyone is of equal status, the people are of the happiest in the world (Buettner, 2010). Such conditions contribute to security, peace and productivity.

Though choosing sustainability now will require generosity and self-sacrifice, what will be gained will be better than what will be lost. St. John’s could lead the way in becoming a sustainable city and the capacity and resources are available to do so.

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