

“Leverage Will Move the Natural Step Ahead”

by Marty Anderson

In my capacity as chairman of the Sustainable Marshfield Committee, I've had the opportunity to present throughout central Wisconsin about sustainability principles. In each presentation, I begin by defining what sustainability is, because the word is often overused and not well defined when it is used.

Put simply, sustainability is defined as living and working in ways that do not jeopardize our current and future social, environmental and economic resources. In other words, we can't take away from the ability of future generations to have a standard of living similar or better than our own conditions today.

In February 2007, the city of Marshfield approved a resolution to become one of the first sustainable communities in the state. In doing so, we also adopted the sustainability framework called The Natural Step, originally founded in Sweden by Dr. Karl Henrik Robèrt in 1989. The Natural Step is made up of four basic principles:

- Reduce dependence upon fossil fuels and extracted underground metals and minerals.
- Reduce dependence on chemicals and other manufactured substances that can accumulate in nature.
- Reduce dependence on activities that harm life-sustaining ecosystems.
- Meet the hierarchy of present and future human needs fairly and efficiently.

These principles are purposely general in their scope. Dr. Robèrt was trying to create a vision for a sustainable definition that everyone can agree with and support. In addition, it gives those working on implementing sustainability a litmus test to determine if what they are doing is moving their community towards sustainability.

The Natural Step was widely implemented across Sweden during an economic downturn similar to what the United States is experiencing today. Now, 20 years later, many of these communities are fossil fuel free and have vibrant economies based on the framework.

A key to effectively implementing sustainability is to realize that it is a journey and not a destination. Marshfield and more than a dozen other communities throughout Wisconsin have begun moving in the direction of implementing The Natural Step. It took Sweden two decades to arrive at where they are today, but with proper investment and leveraging successes from other cities and countries, we may be able to advance much more quickly.

If you are interested in more reading about The Natural Step framework for sustainability, the Marshfield Public Library has The Natural Step for Communities or visit www.naturalstep.org. In addition, the Sustainable Marshfield Committee meets the first Tuesday of every month and residents are encouraged to attend to learn more about what is being done locally to follow The Natural Step framework.

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