

Article from the future: Energy Descent in Retford.

Retford was slow in coming to the realization that "business as usual" may not keep local citizens' standard of living at an acceptable level. As they saw energy prices hike many were concerned the local economy was in danger of spiraling down out of control. Many others found it incomprehensible that energy security could be synonymous with economic security. Fortunately, the neighboring city of Porena had embarked upon a successful sustainable development process several years earlier. They turned to Porena city manager, Aaron Heathcliffe, for help. They have now managed to start activities rolling in eight major areas involving just about everyone in the area. Part of the reason for Retford's success was getting people involved in a way that built a sense of urgency and importance.

But how serious and urgent *was* the situation? Says Jeff Small, coordinator for the Sustainable Development Office of Retford: "Our starting point was one of a need to understand the situation from the point of view of security of living standards. The national government had delegated responsibility for sustainable development down to the local level. We had received a list of goals to strive for." Jeff continues, "how urgent was the situation? We had no idea. Some people were saying oil depletion would mean energy price hikes above the annual 4-5% we were seeing. Others were saying market mechanisms would prevail. Interestingly, very few actually knew how things worked in the local region. And even fewer could navigate the figures needed. We found ourselves comparing apples and pears. For instance; how much food do we need (often measured in calories), how much food do we grow (measured in tons) how

much energy needed to grow food (measured in liters of diesel)".

It was just this need to understand the situation that prompted Aaron Heathcliffe to use a data gathering and modeling approach. Based on the local council's own GIS (geographic information system) he asked the office to set up a project group to find out how the living standard basics were provided. These included water, housing, food, jobs, transport etc. All figures and explanations were to be put into the GIS system so project members could "fly" through the area to gain an understanding of how these systems were working.

Jeff Small again; "The exercise was a real awakening; for example, we do not grow enough food in the area to feed all the population. There is massive commuting every day, and parts of the area are not served by public transport. The system was extremely useful. The group could ask the operator to, say, "show us the number of people living out of walking distance of public transport" – and we could see immediately the information in graphic form on the map". It was the process of gathering the data that started to create both awareness and multilateral cooperation. For instance, it started to become apparent what was NOT known about water supply. People are just used to turning on taps, and very few had a view of the sewage treatment processes. The data gathering exercises produced very clear and comprehensive information, which the project published. Pictures from the studies helped create awareness for what was to come.

It was the next phase however, that really created the impetus for change. The project team started to bring in representatives of every stakeholder organization. Each basic element of living standard was mapped against the relevant stakeholder organization. The local business

association, residents' association and gardening club got very active early on. The next step was to ask representatives to review the data, and to evaluate it. They got as the starting point the government goals and security of living standards. They were to come up with risks and priorities. A database related to the GIS system stored geographical positioning data, the issue description, risk and priority. All the data could be aggregated to give a general overview of the risk of potential of shortfall or excess for local residents. What was interesting was that from the point of view of each stakeholder organization's purpose, as stated in their articles of association, the current situation was not really producing the sort of results they were after. Local businesses were struggling, resident's associations complaining of falling standards, food quality was poor... Oil depletion risks were changing the situation from uncomfortable to downright disastrous.

Aaron Heathcliffe commented; "we never mentioned politics once. What was interesting was that no-one really disputed where the priorities lay. Maybe some had different ideas about how to solve them, but this fact-based method helped build a basis for consensus". At this point, the stakeholder organizations were invited to send representatives to work out a plan of action. The plan would include commitments by each organization, so only representatives with enough mandate were sent to the action planning. The plans were based on the shortfall –excess evaluations. Excess would be a resource to use to mitigate shortfalls in other areas, by for example trading with other areas.

In the end, the groups had worked out about eight major areas to tackle and strategies for each. Commitments from the various stakeholder organizations were not enough, however, for real changes to be brought about. For instance, one scheme involved reducing commuting by job-

swapping. Although the local business association had set the scheme up it needed employees to volunteer for the changes. To sweeten the deal, anyone who swapped their job would be given a free travel permit. Anyone who gave up their car would be prioritized for housing and so on.

So the next step was for each stakeholder organization to invite their members and members of the public to presentations. The office of sustainable development decided to stage a large exhibition in conjunction with the local May fair. Large displays took visitors through the analysis the project groups had gone through, and other displays asked for volunteers. Most of the key area booths took the form of displays with four sections. In the middle they showed how the area works today – what we have - the left pane showed - why we can't go on – the right pane: what we need and the bottom pane – what we must do. The next set of displays talked about managing the transition, and the need for overall coordination of efforts. People would then drift to the display "get involved" just before the exit.

One group is planning to re-build some parts of the town to make easy walking access. And they are talking about a canal for energy efficient transport of heavy goods. One priority is diesel for the construction machines. They want to dig ditches and create the conditions for permaculture before the machines become useless. Jeff Small is excited; "from what looked to be a dark future we are hopeful we are headed for an easier, more social life, with a feeling of being closer to nature!"

This is an extract from the coming sequel to the book "Inventing for the Sustainable Planet"

<http://www.avbp.net/html/porena.html>