

Many of us have good intentions when it comes to saving the planet but it isn't always convenient to do the "green" thing. It is heartening to see more organic produce on supermarket shelves, commercials for low-VOC paint, and compact fluorescent bulbs everywhere you look, but will the trend of sustainability become a nation-wide habit? Big business is certainly cashing in as Americans spend their green to be green. At the local, state and national levels, government officials are taking notice and some of them are taking The Natural Step.

TNS Q&A

- *What is The Natural Step (TNS)?* TNS is a model for achieving sustainability.
- *Why do we need a model for sustainability?* Once there is consensus that certain practices are unsustainable, TNS offers a method for meeting about, planning for, acting toward, and achieving the goal of sustainability.
- *Why should we care about sustainability?* The World Commission on Environment and Development has defined sustainability as: "Meeting the needs of the present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs."

Most scientists agree that the Earth's natural resources are in decline due to human activity while the demand for these natural resources is increasing due to population growth and over consumption. Once we realize the extent to which our actions will impact future generations, making the sustainable choice will seem like the only choice.

TNS - BACK TO BASICS

Twenty years ago, Karl-Henrik Robèrt, a Swedish oncologist, contacted many of his colleagues in the scientific and environmental community and challenged them to discuss the issue of sustainability and develop a set of principles to guide individuals, businesses, and municipalities along a more sustainable path. This group of scientists identified 4 system conditions that contribute to the degradation of our environment:

1. Humans dig up and release substances from below the earth's surface faster than nature can handle them. Emissions from fossil fuels and the build-up of heavy metals in our environment create toxins in our air, water, and food.
2. Humans manufacture compounds and chemicals that accumulate faster than nature can break them down into their individual elements. For example, pesticides and fire retardants.
3. Human activity is breaking down natural systems faster than nature can rebuild them. The over harvesting of trees, fish and game and the destruction of wetlands due to real estate development are examples of this system condition.
4. Many humans are finding it increasingly difficult to meet their basic needs. Workers in impoverished areas will continue to exploit natural resources in order to survive unless a better living can be made in a sustainable way.

TNS AT WORK IN OUR CITY

The City of Madison has made sustainability a top priority in recent years. In 2005, the city adopted The Natural Step framework to guide decision-making, operations and management throughout city agencies. You may have noticed some of the following:

- Periodic training seminars on The Natural Step to teach TNS principles and challenge participants to use TNS to achieve greater sustainability in real life situations.
- Monthly Meeting of the Whole for TNS participants to discuss ongoing projects and listen to experts on topics related to sustainable city government.
- Several APMs (Administrative Procedure Memoranda) have been written to include TNS language and relate to the procurement, maintenance and disposal of items in accordance with TNS principles. (See APM 4-5, APM 4-6, and APM 4-7 at www.cityofmadison.com/mayor/apm.)

Currently, several projects are underway in city agencies that will improve sustainability in Madison. Projects for 2009 include water conservation through a toilet replacement rebate program, the study of an anaerobic digester for organic matter, and a rewrite of the city's zoning code that integrates TNS principles.

What are you doing to make Madison a greener place to live?

Stay informed about The Natural Step by checking the mayor's web page frequently. To review the Top Ten lists of TNS projects over the past three years, go to www.cityofmadison.com/mayor/tns.

For more information about how other cities and towns are using TNS, check out The Natural Step for Communities by Sarah James and Torbjörn Lahti. You can literally *check it out* from the City of Madison library!