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THE GREEN FORUM

Mobilizing Community Action for a More Sustainable Future in Just Three Hours

By Jay W. Vogt

The Green Technology Committee is a group of community volunteers chartered in 2006 by the Selectmen of the rural town of Lincoln, Massachusetts, USA, to reduce energy consumption in town facilities. As the committee reflected on its charge, members realized that their success depended on gaining the support of the entire town.

A couple members approached me about facilitating a Green Forum for Lincoln. The committee wanted folks to come, learn things, get inspired, and take action. They had no idea how to make that happen, and asked me what I thought.

Now Lincoln is the quintessential Yankee New England town, complete with a central town green and a white-steepled church, surrounded by grassy meadows and forested hills. New Englanders generally don't like it when others tell them what to do. Yet they are the first to help others if it serves their self-interest. We New Englanders jokingly call this "Yankee communism." I sensed that the residents of this town would love Open Space, where no one sets the agenda for others, and nothing happens unless people choose to make it happen. So I proposed a forum in Open Space, and after some initial shock and worry, the committee accepted.

We had three hours to gather on a Sunday afternoon. The whole town (population 5000) would be invited. An old town building with a great open hall on the second floor and some meeting rooms on the first was available. The theme would be: "What are the issues and opportunities in creating a greener Lincoln?" There would be no presentations, only a large resource display on tables around the hall. Participants would be invited to step forward, state their issue, claim a space, and convene a discussion. There would be a gathering time to welcome participants and create the agenda (thirty minutes), a single discussion round (ninety minutes), and a final closing circle (thirty minutes).

In talking about the theme with the committee, many members shared stories of things they or their neighbors were doing to make their lives greener. One person had organized some neighbors to

buy and plant cherry trees together. Another was experimenting with drought-resistant grasses. Another was researching the most effective energy audits. Another had just bought a share in the produce of a local, organic farm. Yet another had recently renovated their home to be heated and cooled with geothermal energy. I loved hearing about these private, passionate acts.

Although Open Space is perfect as it is, I was moved to find some way to consciously collect and share these stories with the community, so that innovative residents could be publicly affirmed for their creativity, while inspiring others, and reminding everyone of their power to make a difference.

I proposed that, after the welcome, we start with thirty minutes of what I called "Green Ads." Committee members would invite participants as they arrived to sign up and share a sixty second "Green Ad" - about some action they were taking, or some resource that they valued, related to sustainability - with the rest of the community. Once again the committee welcomed this approach, and with growing excitement about the upcoming Forum, set about marketing it with enthusiasm.

Finally the Green Forum Sunday came, on a lovely spring afternoon, and about 130 people - from preteens to seniors - arrived at the hall. They munched on healthy snacks and drank unbottled local water as they gathered. Thirty people signed up to share a sixty second "Green Ad," which started the Forum with homespun wisdom and humor. About ten residents stepped forward to convene discussions, on topics as diverse as improving community transportation, increasing use of school buses and electric cars, expanding community supported agriculture, helping residents understand the value and importance of native vegetation, financing solar technology, and making buildings more energy efficient.

The Green Technology Committee reported, in the March-April 2009 issue of The Lincoln Review, that: "In just three hours, Jay helped us all to gather our energies and interests, connect personal values and visions with collective needs, and make some concrete forward plans. With more than 2% of Lincoln residents present, this establishes a firm footing for a town-wide commitment. Our hope was that attendees would 'Leave the event energized with valuable, practical information, an action plan, new resources and support of like-minded people.' And it looks like they did!"

Cities and towns around the world are looking to mobilize the talent, knowledge, and motivation of their residents to make their communities greener and more sustainable. Lincoln's example shows that, with Open Space, and as little as three hours, a community can come together and discover its strengths and passions for more sustainable living.

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