

SustainAbility: Sustainability Roundtable 1

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This past Tuesday I had the privilege of participating in the 2009 Western Colorado Sustainability Roundtable with 40 other lucky people. The event was hosted by the Alliance for Sustainable Colorado with help from Green Guides of the Grand Valley and Western Colorado Congress.

“Advancing sustainability through collaboration,” is the motto for the Colorado alliance working primarily with nonprofits, businesses, governments and academia. All sectors were represented at the local roundtable.

The alliance is hosting at least 7 regional roundtable events and will compile a statewide Sustainability Report for the Governor’s Office and distribution throughout Colorado.

The alliance is housed in the Alliance Center, a rehabilitated historic building in Lower Downtown Denver constructed to Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) standards. The Center is home for more than 30 nonprofit groups and has meeting rooms.

Alliance Education Director Janna Six presented a workable definition of sustainability, taken from the 1987 Brundtland Commission, “Sustainable development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

The roundtables are part of an outreach effort to support a network of sustainability movements around the state. Additional education involves speakers, tours of the center, workshops and collaborative research.

Building Colorado Coalition and promoting electric vehicles are high on the list of policy advocacy for the alliance. To learn more about the Alliance for Sustainable Colorado check out www.sustainablecolorado.org.

Six introduced the concept of the “triple bottom line” for businesses. Instead of looking only at profit, or financial capital, this paradigm also takes into account people as human capital and the planet as natural capital.

As a sustainability roundtable there were a couple of notable differences from most meetings. The normal deluge of handouts was absent replaced by brochures on a resource table for those so inclined.

Food for the event was donated by Chipotle, a company dedicated to purchasing local food, and the alliance provided cloth napkins, real plates, silverware, mugs and cups.

It was exciting to hear what local governments are up to and Mesa County commissioner Steve Acquafresca touted county sustainability efforts. The facility energy conservation program involves new facilities and upgrading old ones and will pay for itself in 12 years.

Multi-modal transportation includes Grand Valley Transit with 3,000-3,500 riders per day and the Colorado Riverfront Trail. According to Acquafresca the trail is a “transportation artery” good for more than just recreation.

The methane collection system at the Mesa County landfill is moving forward. A study determined good potential for collecting methane to generate electricity to heat and power the new facilities moving to the solid waste campus. The next step is building the underground portion to collect the methane, which will be measured and flared off for a year before moving on to generation.

Kathy Portner, neighborhood services manager for the city of Grand Junction spoke about the CORE team organized to promote sustainability. CORE stands for Conserving Our Resources Efficiently and the team has accomplished a great deal in its two-year history.

A brief sample of current and future projects includes energy efficiency and renewable upgrades, experimenting with more efficient lighting for streets and recycling education. GJ CORE is also involved in the methane capture project at Persigo Wastewater Treatment Plant and a neighborhood improvement project in the area around the main library.

Grand Junction Mayor Pro Tem Teresa Coons discussed the Community Comprehensive plan favoring urbanized nodes, a mixed-use model where people can live and work in their neighborhood. Meetings about the 25-30-year plan will probably take place next month prior to adoption.

A number of promising ideas were tossed around. One idea that stood out was a Clean Energy Options Local Improvement District. The district uses private funds raised by bond sales to finance energy efficient and renewable upgrades to homes or businesses. The money is paid back through increased property taxes for program participants.

Lively conversation dealt with local sustainability efforts that are in place and working, opportunities ripe for development and next steps to improve collaboration locally and statewide. I'll explore that aspect of the roundtable in my July 18 column.