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TOWN FORUM

SOLUTIONS

Huck Fairman

Exploring concept of ecomunicipalities

Recently at Rider College, Sustainable Lawrence presented a unique author, Torbjorn Lahti, from the Torne Valley in northern Sweden along the Finish border. He came offering his personal story, an introduction to the concept of ecomunicipalities, (as one of its originators in the 1980s,) and copies of his book on his experience and ideas, "My Journey with the Ecomunicipalities."

As its title implies, the book takes us through the many starts and stops that this holistic approach to community experienced as it gradually evolved. It is not a concept that sprang up full-blown overnight, but began as an effort to preserve the environment. Its proponents, however, soon saw that success would require a more complete and sustainable approach to communities and their three components, nature, society and man. And although this began as a local effort, it was soon influenced by ideas from around Sweden and Europe.

The recognition that input came from many directions pointed Lahti and colleagues toward a systemic approach, that is, one taking into account, all at once, the primary functions of a region, town and individuals. They saw that they needed to address not only ecological issues but a community's education and economy, its businesses, agriculture and food, its water and waste, its transportation and power, land use and culture, all tied together by an articulation of general goals, such as: What future do we want?

They discovered, as well, that progress in all parts of a community at the same time could only flow from discussion among all its levels. And this would require the creation of social structures to store and evaluate what was learned in the process. In addition they would need other structures to coordinate between towns and regions, as many resources and functions overlap.

And in time Lahti and company recognized that they would also have to have an on-going supervisory and inspirational nucleus to maintain focus, momentum, and to smooth out rifts. In the midst of this multi-faceted process Lahti discovered that what fascinated him was the interplay between the individual and the collective.

As American readers of the book are introduced to the elaborate components of ecomunicipalities, some might wonder why the Swedes and other Europeans have devoted so much time and thought to these concepts. Lahti's answer might well be that their efforts were responses to a growing awareness that towns and regions need a more comprehensive approach to maintaining and improving their overall quality of life, as our lives grow ever more complex and interconnected. And piecemeal approaches, they found, would not work.

On a larger, and perhaps even more compelling scale, is Lahti's observation that only a global, social movement can address the environmental and economic challenges we all face.

With those rationales in mind, and recognizing there are many moving parts to their efforts, they adopted a set of values, and then a list of broad goals.

a. The economy is here to serve the people,

not the reverse

b. Development is about people, not stuff
c. Growth is not the same as development; development does not necessarily require growth (GDP is not necessarily an indicator of development)

d. No economy is possible over time without factoring in the ecosystem's condition

e. The economy is a system, subordinate to a larger system, the biosphere.

f. Reverence for life outweighs economic or financial interests

Among the goals:
- A willingness to adopt a systems view
- A common vision as the driving force
- An underlying belief in democracy and participation

- Both horizontal and vertical integration
- Process leadership and learning processes

- Platform building where lessons of what works can be preserved and passed on as participants learn, plan, and do

- And finally a community or region must

establish a "capacity center" which can coordinate not only what the community learns but maintain its progress, education, networks, research, contacts, and even marketing.

In Central Jersey we have, in addition to our governing bodies and Master Plans, the quasi-governing, largely volunteer organizations, Sustainable Lawrence, Sustainable Princeton, and Sustainable Jersey, each planning and overseeing commendable improvements in sustainability. But we are a long way from the coordination that Lahti describes in Sweden and now in other Baltic nations.

This may be because the communities of Northern Sweden are much smaller and less densely populated than many of ours and are more homogeneous, simplifying coordination. In addition, Sweden experienced an extended recession in the 80s and 90s and many of the northern towns and villages lost population while struggling economically. It was therefore easier to make the case that those towns and region needed to turn in a different

direction.

But Lahti, who has visited much of Europe and parts of this country, predicts that the changes global warming is already creating, plus those baked into the system but not fully impacting us yet, will require change. And his wide-ranging experience has led him to conclude that the limits to growth, in its current configurations, will also require change.

Following much experimentation, reasoning, and restarting, Lahti and partners have given us a view and strategies as to how we might re-design and implement social coordination along a more sustainable paradigm.

While this reader found the detail in Lahti's personal experiences and anecdotes sometimes labyrinthine, the core lessons that he shares with us have been thoughtfully worked out and clearly could be beneficial. Indeed, in a number of cases, we have already implemented some of those lessons. But this book offers additional ideas and strategies which can take us closer where we need to go.