

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in Local Government

By Rick Beauchamp

Today's society is faced with many social, environmental and economic challenges impacting both our local and global environment. If not addressed, these impacts will have far-reaching effects on future generations. Prevalent discussions around the kitchen table center on how we can safeguard ourselves from added pollution to the air we breathe and the water we drink. Some challenges and initiatives include:

- water and air quality
- solid waste management
- stream side protection
- rural community sustainability
- economic reliability
- soil contamination
- rain forest protection
- deterioration of the ozone
- resource extraction management.

A new recognition is emerging for stewardship from both the corporate and public sectors to fulfill our legal and moral responsibilities for existing and future generations. Society in general, business, and communities recognize the need to employ sound business and management practices to ensure the sustainability of communities, the environment and individuals' well-being.

A key problem is that no one knows exactly what *sustainability* means. To define it we must first understand how our values are aligned with those of the public we serve. We know our taxpayers want quality service that is delivered cost effectively. Is the general public ready to pay extra to help preserve our communities for future generations? There is some evidence that the majority of the public are becoming more and more aware of the seriousness of effects that unsustainable growth can have on our environment.

The integration of environmental, social and economic values is a real challenge facing public leaders. Our economy over the years has been very volatile, experiencing sharp rises and declines. This volatility has greatly impacted our ability to focus on the bigger picture — global sustainability. After all, without a healthy environment all the robust economy in the world will not allow us to coexist. We all want to build healthy economically stable communities that enable people to reach their full potential; communities that can be integrated into a larger vision that can help preserve our planet for future generations. Is there a common thread or road map that might be used to help us develop this "Sustainable Action Plan"?

I am sure there are other strategies out there but there is one that has caught the attention of both the private and now, the public sector. This initiative is called "*The Natural Step*"(TNS). It is an international network of non-educational organizations – working to accelerate the movement toward a sustainable society. TNS provides a planning framework that is grounded in natural science and serves as a guide for business, communities, academia, government entities, and individuals undertaking the path of sustainable development. *The Natural Step* provides a shared mental model, understanding, and common language that facilitates cooperation across organizations, disciplines and cultures. It has no boundaries. It recognizes that what happens in one part of a system effect every other part.

TNS framework focuses on first-order principles at the beginning of causeeffect relationships. The framework provides a compass that directs individuals and organizations toward environmental, social and economic sustainability.

TNS was founded in 1989 by Dr.Karl-Henrik Robert, one of Sweden's leading cancer researchers who saw first-hand the link between environ-mental contaminants and human health. In an effort to transcend the endless environmental degradation and decreasing human health, Dr.Robert set out to define the guiding principles for a sustainable society – *The Natural Step* framework.

TNS begins with a goal of sustainability for both people and planet, and combines science and a systems perspective in order to articulate a comprehensive set of first-order principles for sustainability.

The Natural Step system conditions include

- subject to increasing concentrations of substances extracted from the Earth's crust
- subject to increasing concentrations of substances produced by society
- impoverished by physical displacement, over-harvesting, or other forms of ecosystems manipulation, and
- resources are used fairly and efficiently in order to meet human needs globally.

The system conditions outline a successful outcome by supplying basic criteria for building a sustainable society and, in that sense, help define the playing field of sustainability by providing some rules for the game. Using first order principles when planning for sustainability has a number of advantages that stem from integrating well-described objectives directly into an initial visioning, or planning process. In the case of sustainability, it often becomes necessary to go beyond relying on existing strategies, which may themselves lie at the root cause of current dilemmas, and to link long-term objectives with immediate decisions.

The Natural Step program is being used by a number of leading private corporations such as Nike and Starbucks. Some public sector participants include the world renowned Resort Municipality of Whistler in BC. Whistler will share their experience in a development session entitled "The Roads to Riches" at this year's Local Government Management Association conference in Whistler, May 29 to June 1, 2001. Other initiators include British Building Corporation of BC, British Columbia Institute of Technology, Royal Roads University in Victoria BC, International Society for the Systems Sciences in Toronto, Ontario and Western Diversification, Government of Canada in Edmonton, Alberta. The development of TNS programs in the United States is growing with the City of Portland, Oregon adopting a pilot project using the TNS framework. In addition the State of Oregon feels so strongly about the program that they are contemplating legislating all local governing authorities to adopt Sustainability Plans over the next 5 to 8 years.

For more information on TNS programs contact *The Natural Step*, The Presidio, Thoreau Centre for Sustainability, PO Box 29372, San Francisco, Ca 94129-0372 or view at www.naturalstep.org.

Summary

We are all aware of the growing problem of sustainability of our local community as well as globally. This growing phenomena has no boundaries and if left unchallenged will see our planet self-destruct within a half dozen centuries.

Our goals and priorities should be to develop Corporate Social Responsibility within our corporate vision to guide politicians and staff in working towards the development of sustainable communities. Many of us at the local level have not made the effort to develop and record our "Corporate Values." Doing so would provide our organizations with a compass to follow in our journey to develop a new corporate culture that is focused on providing the stewardship required to develop sustainable communities and also preserve our planet.

If you have developed a corporate initiative that you would like to share with other local government jurisdictions please forward them to our Local Government Management Association of BC at 737 Fort Street, Victoria, BC V8T 2V1 Tel: (250) 383-7032 Fax: (250) 838-4879 or E-mail: lgma@lgma.ca and we will place them on our new data center web site for local government and other public institutions — civicinfo.bc.ca.

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