

News Article

Portsmouth, N.H., residents take on sustainability

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Engaging in community dialogue for change has become a routine way for Portsmouth residents to grapple with local issues. This time, they're working together to create a more sustainable community

City to study sustainability

Effort aims to get residents talking about big changes

By Adam Leech

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PORTSMOUTH — With the term "sustainability" becoming more and more ingrained in the collective consciousness of the Seacoast, the Piscataqua Sustainability Initiative and Portsmouth Listens are teaming up to implement sustainable practices.

Through education, PSI, a grass-roots effort borne out of the city's Blue Ribbon Committee on Sustainable Practices, hopes to generate excitement and energy about making a difference in the Portsmouth community and beyond.

An eight-week series of Portsmouth Listens study circles this fall will consider how to create a network of citizens committed to sustainability. The circles will center around a book, "The Natural Step for Communities," by Torbjorn Lahti and Sarah James, a guide book on how municipalities can be sustainable.

Bert Cohen, a member of the city committee and PSI and teacher of sustainable practices at the University of New Hampshire, said the public's awareness of issues such as

global warming and energy consumption has provided a unique opportunity to make positive changes.

"There's been a real shift in consciousness around what is happening on the planet and some urgency on what we need to do," Cohen said. "So I think we have real terrific opportunity to focus on what each of us can do as individuals and how we can (effect change in) the big system."

Lahti and James' book lists four sustainability objectives: reduce wasteful dependence on fossil fuels, underground metals and minerals; reduce wasteful dependence on chemicals and unnatural substances; reduce encroachment on nature; and meet human needs fairly and efficiently.

The guide has been tested and revised by many users and has been particularly successful in Sweden, thanks in large part to study circles.

Fellow PSI and committee member Skye Maher said the city's current initiatives, such as building the new public library under the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design building system, planning for a green fire station and encouraging sustainable practices in the zoning ordinance rewrite are all good things. But more needs to be done inside and outside city borders to enact change on a larger level.

"The Natural Step for Communities is designed to help people get to a deeper level of understanding of the systematic changes that need to occur, to let people know, 'What do I do after I change my light bulbs?' Maher said.

Both Cohen and Maher said they're hopeful for a good turnout to the Portsmouth Listens study circles and that the process can help, the way it did with the master plan in

2004 and, most recently, with the Portsmouth Middle School.

"We want to be encouraged by terrific things we're doing, but we also want to fully grasp the magnitude of the changes we need to make," Cohen said. "So it's a balancing act of staying encouraged and not getting overwhelmed by what has to happen."

GO & DO

Who: The Piscataqua Sustainability Initiative and Portsmouth Listens

What: A series of study circles to answer the question, "How do we create a network of citizens committed to sustainability?"

When: 10 a.m. on Saturday, Sept. 29

Where: Portsmouth Public Library

more info: Visit www.thepsi.net or e-mail bertcohen@comcast.net.

[The Study Circles Resource Center](#) is a national organization that helps local communities develop their own ability to organize large-scale, diverse dialogue that is structured to support and strengthen measurable community change. Created in 1989 by The Paul J. Aicher Foundation, SCRC has worked with more than 500 communities nationwide on many different public issues