

## SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

**Sustainable Community Development (SCD)** focuses on strengthening the local economy along with community health, the environment, and quality of life, recognizing their interconnections. It is a systems approach. SCD is ultimately the realization that “all solutions are local”; it is “where the rubber meets the road”; it is the manifestation of “Think globally, act locally”.

For example, **sustainable energy planning** examines how to transition away from global energy dependence toward community self-reliance through energy conservation and efficiency coupled with designing and implementing economically viable, as well as socially and environmentally sustainable local or regional clean energy production systems. Sustainable energy planning recognizes that the true costs of energy to community health and well being go far beyond the price at the pump or the price per kilowatt hour of burning coal. In Wisconsin, SCD is commonly associated with adoption of The Natural Step or “Eco-Municipality” model for communities and a plan to move toward sustainability.<sup>1</sup>

The gauge of community sustainability is the degree to which a community and its socio-economic base is self-sufficient in energy, food, water, shelter, transportation, financing, and local employment such that it contributes to the native ecosystem capacity to sustain life across multiple generations. Sustainable community indicators, locally established values for which data is collected and trends tracked and reported, are often used to measure progress toward sustainability.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, a community is sustainable when it is able to meet its present needs while safeguarding the ability of future generations to meet their needs with the same or richer quality of life.<sup>3</sup>



### WISCONSIN MUNICIPALITIES WITH SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY RESOLUTIONS 2005-2008:

ASHLAND (C), BARABOO (C), BAYFIELD (T),  
BAYFIELD (C), BELOIT (C), COTTAGE GROVE (T),  
DOUGLAS COUNTY, DUNN COUNTY,  
JOHNSON CREEK (V), LA CROSSE (C),  
LA CROSSE COUNTY, MADISON (C),  
MANITOWOC (C), MARSHFIELD (C),  
MENASHA (C), MENASHA (T), NEENAH (C),  
SHEBOYGAN (C), SPRING GREEN (V),  
STEVENS POINT (C), WASHBURN (C)<sup>4</sup>

C – City  
V – Village  
T – Township

### Why adopt SCD?

**Sustainable community development is important because it is a fundamental and essential foundation for living off the interest of the community and local region, rather than the capital.** It is widely recognized that “community” is increasingly vulnerable to a globalized economy that siphons off the human, natural, and financial capital for diminishing returns without replacing what has been lost. As such, communities are increasingly “unsustainable”. In the last few years, sustainable community development has become the primary rallying point for those who recognize its non-partisan appeal and applicability to addressing common issues such as energy costs and generation, climate change, peak oil, water quantity and quality, food shortages and pricing, socio-economic disparity, and other similar scale issues.

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## COMMON USES

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**SCD is not only the umbrella concept** by which sustainable community resolutions and plans are written and approved by local government, it is increasingly the foundation for small, medium, and large scale business models. In addition, it is used by neighborhoods, community groups, and a variety of sectors in the community to coalesce, find common ground and goals, and develop capacity to identify local assets and set a course toward more sustainable actions.

### Sustainable Community Development Applied Uses

- Vision Statements
- Sustainable Community / Eco-Municipality Resolutions
- Green Business Models
- Sustainable Economic Development
- Comprehensive Planning Process
- Strategic Planning Processes
- Land Use & Transportation Planning
- Green Building and Zoning Codes
- Ordinances
- Operational Policies & Procedures
- Environmental and Social Justice Policies
- Community Study Circles, Education and Organizing

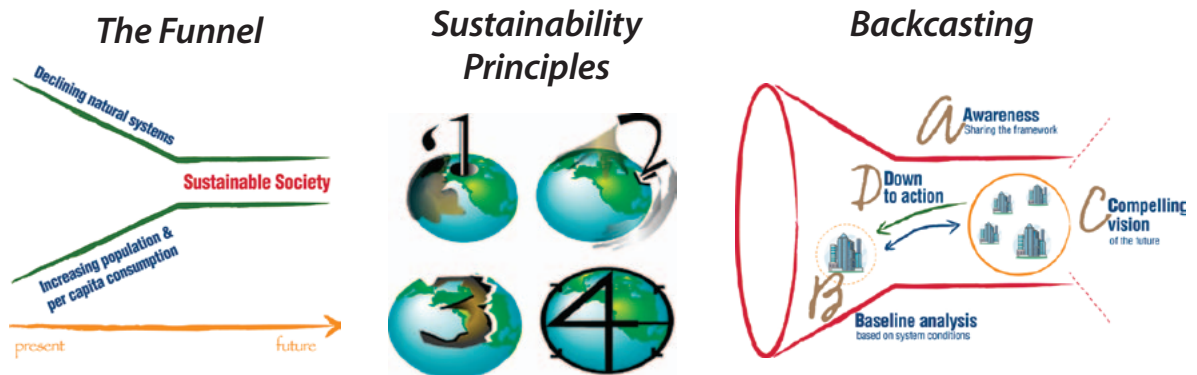
*“We can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.”*

— Albert Einstein

### Implementation

Sustainable Community Development implementation is dependent upon the user taking an educational and/or leadership position in its promotion that builds on engagement. The success of SCD as an umbrella principle in communities and/or businesses is dependent upon both an administrative / top-down and grassroots / bottom-up approach. A Sustainable Community / Eco-Municipality resolution, for example, can be introduced by a city council member onto the council agenda. It can also come from a petition effort by locally concerned citizens, faith-based groups, or economic development groups. It is typically an organic process that is unique to the political circumstances and dynamics of each community.

The three basic concepts of The Natural Step: the funnel, the four systems conditions, and backcasting as strategic planning.



By working toward sustainability, communities become aware and educated about sustainability, create a compelling vision of what their sustainable municipality would look like, assess where they are today in relation to that vision, develop an action plan to change course, and begin implementation to make progress. This is called Backcasting or the ABCD framework of The Natural Step (see above).

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## ATTRIBUTES OF SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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### **COST: Money or staff resources required to implement SCD**

SCD is conceptually and politically driven, and does not require public expenditure of funds until such time that various processes change as a result of adoption. It will require additional staff time to work with the local government internally and with the community in implementation.

### **PUBLIC ACCEPTANCE: The public's positive or negative perception of SCD**

In general, sustainability is becoming a commonly accepted concept. "Green is patriotic. Green is strategic. Green is the new red, white and blue" reports Thomas Friedman, *NY Times* columnist and author. The public agrees that sustainability in the context of natural resource and economic issues is especially relevant. Social justice and equity are much more difficult to articulate, integrate, and find acceptable. When presented with solutions that level the playing field for everyone with little negative impact to any particular group, that can be surmounted.

### **POLITICAL ACCEPTANCE: Politician's willingness to implement SCD**

Politicians tend to be sensitive to SCD most commonly out of lack of understanding and ability to articulate it to their constituents. Sustainable community development is best promoted when more than a single elected official "champions" the effort. The mayor or village president can create a committee with local stakeholders and staff to study what sustainability would look like in their community and how to move forward.<sup>5</sup> Or, depending on the scale of grassroots support, political will can ensue. Using The Natural Step framework helps promote acceptance by providing a proven definition and process to get toward a local shared sustainability vision.

### **EQUITY: Fairness to stakeholders regarding who incurs costs and consequences**

SCD is conceptually difficult to place a price tag on using traditional economics and contemporary cultural expectations for quick return with inequitable returns. Some sustainability initiatives such as energy efficiency upgrades provide rapid return on investment. Cost-benefit analysis of other sustainability initiatives requires a mindset for long term payback equitably distributed across all stakeholders. Impact on taxes, fees, or other public investment must be presented fairly, as an investment in the future with future returns that might be longer than a four-year political term.<sup>6</sup>

### **ADMINISTRATION: Level of complexity to manage, maintain, enforce, and monitor**

Institutionalization – degree of integration in job requirements and decision making. Typically, local governments incorporate sustainability through a staff coordinator, with department heads responsible across departments. Institutionalizing SCD depends on fairly significant sustainability-based literacy among elected officials and professional staff in order to make significant progress. The concepts are not overtly difficult, especially if couched within The Natural Step model. Training is widely and readily available.

### **SCALE: The geographic scale at which the tool is best implemented – Village, City, & Town**

SCD is most often applied at the village, city, and town levels, with secondary expansion to both the county and regional level where the greater economies of scale can be realized. County and regional are more complicated by the geo-political boundary complexities. Bio-regions or watersheds may work in some areas.

## Sustainability Take-Home Message

*Communities and natural environments are complex systems. Adopting sustainability as a core objective can guide policy-making, planning and decision-making toward the common goal of sustainable community development. This is an essential foundation for living off the interest of the community and local region, rather than the capital, thereby safeguarding the social and ecological systems on which mankind depends for survival.*



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January 2009

<sup>1</sup>S. Gruder, A. Haines, J. Hembd, L. MacKinnon, and J. Silberstein: *Toward a Sustainable Community: A Toolkit for Local Government*. University of Wisconsin-Extension, January 2007

<sup>2</sup>Community Indicators Handbook; Second Edition; Redefining Progress, 2006  
[http://www.rprogress.org/sustainability\\_indicators/community\\_indicators.htm](http://www.rprogress.org/sustainability_indicators/community_indicators.htm)

<sup>3</sup>World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, "Brundtland Report", 1987

<sup>4</sup>UW-Extension Sustainable Community Development Capacity Center  
<http://www2.uwsuper.edu/sustainability> (Eco-municipality tab for links to sustainable community resolutions)

<sup>5</sup>Gruder et al. *Toward a Sustainable Community: A Toolkit for Local Government*. Pp 8-11

<sup>6</sup>Redefining Progress