

Nichols Hills

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE JULY 2009 VOLUME 13, NUMBER 7

News



Grand Style

Convergence
of Nature
& Design



SAY CHEESE!

*Ricotta: Versatile,
Healthy, Delightful*

GREAT ESCAPES

If Wishes Were Travels

SMART: An Easy Way to Appreciate Sustainability

By Mary Ellen Ternes

You've probably heard the word "sustainability," but you may have not been comfortable assigning an actual definition to it. If you're a runner, you may have thought of a "sustainable pace" – in my case the comfortable Saturday morning almost-jog which can last until my dog Mack complains. That's really not a bad illustration of the principle of sustainability, which simply means "capable of being sustained" for a time, or indefinitely, without, well, something bad happening. And now it's the new buzz word. While "green" might be overused, and sometimes even misused, sustainability is simply "smart," from a broader, long-term perspective.

What is smart these days? Saving money. What's a good way to save money? Don't waste. We can avoid waste if we prevent or minimize what we discard directly (by failing to recover) or incidentally (through unnecessary or inefficient use).

Consider gas, food, water, electricity, paper, packaging, chemicals, coal, heat and all the other "stuff" that makes the quality of our daily lives possible. Rigorous implementation of sustainable principles would require that we look at each step in the life cycle of these things – first narrowly, and then from a broader perspective – recognizing the relationship of each step to other considerations in a sort of "beyond borders" integrated analysis to identify waste.

As an example, some of us want very much to recycle to avoid consumption of resources necessary to manufacture the item we've separated for recycling. So, we

find out where our city has located its recycling bins and religiously drop off our recyclables – and we feel victorious as a result. But with the economy in its current sluggish state, there may be no market for the recyclables, and they might simply sit there, or our solid waste management company might either charge us to transport them to a recycler where they may still languish in a warehouse until the market improves or truck them to the landfill. Have we prevented waste by recycling in that case? Maybe not. That's why sustainable solid waste management planning begins with "REDUCE, reuse and recycle," emphasizing the avoidance of waste generation in the first place.

Avoiding waste is not always as simple as it sounds, and we may not even be aware when we discard. Garbage is easy because we see it, smell it, lift it, and we have to listen to the wailing of our children when we make them take it outside, but what about everything else?

How many of us know that by avoiding power use during hours of peak demand, we might avoid firing up another electricity generating unit? And how would we know whether we were even in a period of peak demand if we have no meter that tells us? At least not yet. Therein lies the challenge in implementing sustainability as a general practice. If we don't see it, smell it, or are otherwise forced to address it, we probably aren't aware of it. And if we're not aware of it, we're not going to deal with it.

So, here is my question to you: How can we become more sustainable? More

specifically, considering all relevant factors, how can we be smarter? Approaches to the sustainability question have been studied, taught and implemented by chemists, engineers, lawyers, architects, city planners, commercial and industrial entities, power plants, construction companies, municipalities, states and countries. With resource challenges around the world, it is a common question the world is asking, with a common goal, but it is a relatively new question for us, as citizens of a country blessed with incredible relative wealth.

With the economy in its current state, it seems to be an appropriate time to examine this issue. I have to admit, I really love rethinking ways we approach life. It's our opportunity to create a more elegant approach, and it compels us to look beyond our own kitchen garbage can and consider the bigger picture. ■



ERICK GFELLER

Mary Ellen Ternes, Esq. is a former chemical engineer from both the EPA and industry. She is currently a shareholder with McAfee & Taft and co-chair with Richard A. Riggs, Esq. of its Renewable and Sustainable Energy Group, and is serving a three-year term as City of Nichols Hills Environment, Health and Sustainability Commissioner.



USE LESS STUFF!

If you're interested in sustainability in practice on a number of various fronts, check out these links:

Municipalities: <http://greencities.com>

Federal Agencies: www.epa.gov/greeningepa/champions/index.htm

Think Tanks: www.rmi.org

Chemists: www.epa.gov/gcc/index.html

Chemical Engineers: www.aiche.org/DivisionsForums/ViewAll/SEF.aspx

MBA Students: www.gsb.columbia.edu/students/organizations/gbc/index.html

Lawyers: www.abanet.org/enviro/committees/climatechange

and something closer to home: www.deq.state.ok.us/mainlinks/uls/index.htm