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Comprehensive Paper

The Sustainable Community

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Sustainability

In the last 30 years, Dubuque’s economic status has seen a complete turnaround. The community had to change and rebuild. The city grew and saw great increase in businesses, living areas and population, all while cleaning the city up. With this newfound success, Dubuque leaders decided to become smart with its current and future growth, and pass the Smarter Dubuque initiative. According to Paul Schultz, Dubuque’s Resource Management Coordinator, “Sustainability is a systemic concept intended to be a means of configuring human activity for high quality continuity and resiliency so that society is able to meet its needs and express its greatest potential in the present, preserve biodiversity, and maintain resource quality in these systems for future generations.”

Dubuque is doing many things to become a sustainable community and be one of the top clean cities in the country. One of the goals right now is to reduce the amount of greenhouse gases emitted by 50% by the year 2030. One large step to achieving this goal is the current renovation and expansion of the Wastewater Treatment Plant. In the past, the remaining waste from cleaning the water was incinerated at the plant, which released a large amount of greenhouse gases into the air. The new expansion will bring in equipment that has the technology to incorporate anaerobic digestion to the leftover waste. This means that the methane produced from the waste can be captured be converted into energy.

The project comes at a price though. The City of Dubuque will spend in excess of $60 million to make the changes. While this sounds like a large investment, it is a smart investment. The leaders in Dubuque make decisions only when they are smart and economical. As you may have noticed, glass no longer gets picked up in the curbside recycling bins. This is because the ends don’t justify the means; the town spent more money on shipping the bottles and processing them than they made, which isn’t economically sound. The plant expansion is both smart and economical though, so the citizens of Dubuque should not be worried. As mentioned by Cindy Steinhauser, Dubuque’s Assistant City Manager, the plant will be able to harness the energy from its own waste. Using anaerobic digestion technology, the entire plant will be powered and heated by its own waste in just a few years after the project is completed.

The City of Dubuque has become a leader and role model to other cities in terms of their sustainability movement. They are helping the citizens become more aware of their daily lives and helping to create an excellent and attractive tourist destination. With great and passionate leaders like Paul Schultz and Cindy Steinhauser at the helm, this movement appears to be at the tip of the iceberg.

Sustainability is a growing trend in our country today. Luckily for us, Dubuque is one of the pioneer cities getting involved and making sustainability a way of life. During my January term class, I got the chance to visit two of the largest waste management establishments in the area, the landfill in Dubuque and Dittmer Recycling. Bev Wagner guided us through the landfill, while Scott Dittmer showed us how Dittmer Recycling processes its items. Each shared great insight to the ins and outs of waste management and what they had to say was both surprising and interesting.

First we went to the Dittmer Recycling plant. Luckily we had co-owner Scott Dittmer as our guide, so he knew everything there was to know about the plant. The first thing that stood out was the massive amount of recyclables that were inside the building, which technically is a good thing. The way that the mixed items were run on the conveyors and separated was amazing in itself. When asked about how sustainability is attained, Dittmer explained how he found buyers of the recyclable material. The prices offered are always changing, and at times, it is even more profitable to send the material to China, which completely surprised me. It was interesting to hear what some of the material is turned into, like the aluminum being made into beams, car parts, and more cans. Continuing on with his own sustainable contributions, Dittmer spoke on recent upgrades to their energy source. They now have solar panels on their roof which are used at the plant. They use new lights that are low energy and last long, and of course, they recycle everything they can at the plant.

Although our trip to the landfill was a bit restricted (the melting snow created muddy situation), it was still an eye-opening experience. The amount and tonnage of sheer trash was crazy to think about. The new fill area they created only has 40 years of expectancy, then what? The most surprising and pretty upsetting part was the fact that 50% of all waste they receive at the landfill can be recycled. Due to federal law though, the landfill employees cannot do anything to the trash after its dumped. I think if people knew that percentage of their waste was able to be reused, that less waste would end up in the landfill, and it could be used for a longer period of time. The landfill had some sustainability of its own though. Since glass is no longer available for curbside pickup in your recycling bin, you can bring it to the landfill and they will crush it and use it for road base, so it won’t go to waste. They also build and save large compost piles, using woodchips, Christmas trees, yard scraps etc. This can be used to create nutrient rich soil for future use. One of the surprising things Bev told us at the landfill was that they planned to stock a surrounding pond with fish and create a habitat for birds to live in. I can’t see how that is safe for the animals, but the landfill stated that they are doing tests to make sure any animals will be assured safety.

In my opinion, more citizens of Dubuque and the surrounding areas need to be informed on what’s going on with our waste situation. The landfill is running out of space, and the pathetic thing is that half of the waste in the landfill currently could be reused after being recycled. Another thing to note is this is just in Dubuque. Dubuque is considered a leader in sustainable practices and we still have 50% of our trash made up of recyclables. Imagine other parts of the country, and big cities such as Chicago and New York. We need to realize that the more material that can be recycled will create more products that can be made from recycled items, which will ultimately create a more sustainable community. Hopefully, progress can keep being made, and we can find more innovative and sustainable ways to get rid of our excess waste. All we can do now is educate, and keep progressing our current waste removal options and recycling abilities.

As has been stated multiple times, Dubuque has in many ways been a leader in our country’s recent sustainability movement. A big step in becoming more sustainable is getting the local business to become sustainable in their own right, and be a sort of “role model” to the local population. One of the ways Dubuque has used to get businesses to become more sustainable is the formation of the Petal Project. Started in 2009, it gave a set amount of requirements for five categories each business must complete in order to become certified. They must also choose a set number of optional requirements from a list set by the organization. The five categories are staff education, pollution prevention, waste reduction, energy conservation, and water conservation. Our class had the chance to talk to one of the organizations members, Kelsey McElroy-Anderson. I liked a lot of what she had to say, yet questioned a couple other ideas she spoke of.

One of the more positive ideas to the Petal Project is the set requirements that a business must comply with to reach its certification. To be set up as a complying business, you have to meet with an official and set up a plan on how you can achieve these requirements. The business must educate its employees on its new ways, and teach them how to be more sustainable with their everyday tasks at works. After this you must executed your plan, while tracking your progress and changes. Once every requirement is met you can become fully certified. This is a good system because they are requirements, so you can’t just preach that your business has become more sustainable. As Scott Dittmer brought to our attention, some companies can say they are working as a “green” company to make themselves seem better in the public’s eye, but behind the scenes they don’t use sustainable habits. This is why the Petal Project is a better certification to have, because it is monitored by the organization.

The Petal Project overall in my opinion is a great thing for the city of Dubuque. One item I would like to see changed though is the review and check-ups performed by the organization. As of now, the business only has to set up a yearly appointment to become recertified. This presents a problem because it leaves a majority of the year unchecked. Once the business has the certification and the citizen’s gratification, they can go back to whatever they were doing if they wanted. All they have to do is tidy up by the time their recertification is about to come up again. I know this would be hard to accomplish and may require more employees, but maybe some sort of monthly check ups could be sent to the organization. Each month, numbers and bills showing savings and sustainability should be sent to the Petal Project to be reviewed. If everything remains positive, then the business is fine, but if they do not meet the requirements, they must rescind their certification.

Again, I fully support the Petal Project and all it stands for. It is an excellent asset to the city of Dubuque, and hopefully surrounding cities and eventually the country can adopt similar systems. If the organization can find a better way to review the businesses they certify, I would have no problems with the project. Hopefully as the program grows and changes, they can incorporate a better system of checking on the businesses.

Loras College itself is Petal Certified, which is great for future students. I say this because I have stated multiple times that I feel educating people on sustainable techniques is a must. Loras can now lead by example, but they need to let everyone know what they’re doing to actually be sustainable. The Sustainable Community class is the first class I have been in that spoke of sustainability. It took us to see and explore real life examples of how to be sustainable, and showed me exactly how unsustainable I was being in my own daily life. We got to see how Loras College achieved its Petal certification, but I feel every student needs to be educated on what we saw also. You can read about stuff and brush it off knowing others are doing their part so you are covered, but that’s not the case. If more students got to see the little things Loras does to be sustainable, they would realize it’s not that hard. Furthermore, I feel Loras should sort of brag about their certification so that other schools will follow their lead. At the student level, I feel this class is a small step in the right direction. It changed how I live my daily life, whether it be turning the water off or using fewer lights around the house, its better in the long run. I feel that this class being required during ones time at Loras would really make a difference. Also, Loras should continue to do activities that get the students involved, like the Beautify Loras project, where students sign up and come out to clean up the campus once the snow melts in the spring.

While sustainability is awesome and what the country needs to strive for, I feel recycling is the best start for someone looking to start being sustainable. Over the course of the last three weeks, I have learned a great deal about the emotional, economic and ecological reasons people recycle. I have gotten the chance to see local organizations that strive to make a difference, and learned about how recycling has grown and changed across the world. Perhaps the biggest influence on my newfound recycling knowledge is the sheer facts and statistics that have been presented to me. When I was told 50% of the garbage that enters the landfill in Dubuque was made up of recyclable goods, I was shocked. How could citizens in Dubuque live comfortably with themselves after hearing that statistic? Could it be that they don’t know the facts? Or is it that they feel like once the trash is out of there house its gone and that’s all that matters? One thing’s for sure, there needs to be better education sent provided to the citizens. Also, the people I’ve met and been educated from are the small part of the population that realize the need for change not only locally but globally.

It’s no surprise that here in America, the majority of people do not like to do anything “extra” without some sort of incentive. Most who practice recycling everyday do it because of the ecological benefit, and because they know it’s the right thing to do. That is there incentive. So what other incentives could there be for someone to recycle? Everyone likes money, so why not make a little extra cash off stuff you’d normally toss in the trash? Businesses that adhere to recycling and sustainable practices can reap the benefits in the form of government grants. Locally, plastic bottles and aluminum cans can be turned in to local grocery stores for a 5 cent per item return here in Iowa. In other states that don’t have a “bottle tax,” you can bring your aluminum cans in bulk to recycling centers, where you’ll receive a payment according to how many pounds of aluminum you bring in. Local resident Bob Wolf has recycled cans for years. The house I live in, along with others surrounding the Loras campus, allow Bob to take our saved cans each weekend. He fills up as much as he can fit in his bag, then heads to Hyvee and gets a check.

While Bob is a good example at the economic incentive of recycling, he is also a great example of the emotional incentive of recycling. Bob realizes that he is making a difference, no matter how big or small. He knows the landfills will just keep filling up and tries his best to tell fellow residents how good recycling is, and how it will help our future generations. Furthermore, Bob’s passion for Dubuque is seen not only in his recycling efforts, but how he uses the money generated by recycling. For the last few years, every check Bob has received has been sent to a local group for disabled children, called Camp Courageous. While Bob doesn’t directly benefit economically from recycling, emotionally it motivates him that extra little bit, and keeps him trying to educate the city’s residents on the importance of recycling. It may not sound like much to some, but I believe everyone can find a reason to convince themselves to recycle because in the bigger picture it is better for everyone.

No matter how you feel about recycling, any little thing you do is better for the world. It saves room in your garbage can, it saves resources, and it helps save the world. Not recycling shows that you do not care about future generations, so if you have children or nieces and nephews, think about that for a second. Maybe that is enough to motivate you, but I think everyone can find an incentive to start practicing recycling. All we need is a way to educate the masses, and to get over the notion that once it’s out of our house its gone forever.

This class has shown me things I had always just brushed aside when I heard them. All the talks of going green never stuck in my head. I would just see other groups doing good things in the community and think I couldn’t make a difference; I’m just one person. But it’s deeper than that. Getting to talk to Bob Wolf was one of the standout moments in my life. He showed me a sort of passion I haven’t seen before. He didn’t have to do anything outside his household but he chose to go around and take recyclable items out of people’s trash because it was the right thing to do, and he does it to help others. He talked to countless college students about why they should recycle themselves, and I was definitely listening. One person doing sustainable activities sticks in others head. It can almost pressure someone into feeling like they aren’t doing enough. Sometimes you just have to take a step back and realize we have gotten so far deep in this hole using our resources up like nothing because people lived these extravagant lifestyles not thinking about what their actions do beyond their households. When you do that, you realize that doing those little things every day does make a difference. If everyone in the world used less water, wasted less trash, turned off lights, or other little things like that then it would make a huge difference to our Earth’s future. I hope that in coming years Loras and other colleges make classes like The Sustainable Community necessary classes for graduation. To add to that, high schools should have a similar class on their list as well. We need to instill these techniques and lifestyles early and often to ensure that young students take notice. The future depends on it, and I hope it is a change that happens quickly.

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