

Greener Living: A weekly guide to sustainability An Introduction to Sustainability

A team of local writers, with a wide variety of expertise on topics pertaining to sustainability, in partnership with the Huntsville Times, are pleased to announce a new article series on sustainability. The series begins today and will continue every Saturday for the next year. The purpose of the series is to educate readers on the opportunities and challenges our region faces in pursuit of a more sustainable future. Each week a new article will focus on a different aspect of sustainability from exciting, home grown, new technologies to the variety of ways in which local citizens are embracing more sustainable lifestyles. But what exactly is sustainability and why does it matter?

Sustainability is interchangeably used with other words like “green products” or “sustainable development” – all of which are important subsets of sustainability. Sustainable development seeks to minimize the depletion of energy, water, and other natural resources while preventing environmental degradation that may occur over the life-cycle of that development. Sustainable development also strives to create environments that are livable, comfortable, safe and that promote productivity. Yet, sustainable development can not occur without “green” products that are assessed through each stage of their existence –from raw material acquisition through manufacturing, packaging, shipping, installation, indoor air quality, performance, and disposal or recovery. Additionally, before a new product is developed we must first ask ourselves whether we really need it. Should we reduce our use, or could we reuse something else instead? Then if the answer to these is “no”, then let’s make sure the new product is recyclable or from renewable resources.

When it comes to sustainability there are as many definitions as there are people interested in defining it. The most commonly recognized definition for sustainability comes from The Brundtland Commission defining sustainability as meeting “the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Sustainable communities therefore seek to preserve and improve the economic, environmental and social characteristics of an area so that present and future community residents can lead healthy, productive, and meaningful lives.

Sustainability, however, is about more than “quality of life”. It is about the interconnectivity and balance that must exist between a community’s economic, environmental and social elements. A community that has jobs but lacks education for a skilled work force is not sustainable. Industry and jobs that make a community economically viable but pollute ground water and air are not sustainable. As the economic and social challenges of the past year can attest, there are limits to the natural, social and built systems that we all depend upon. As our community faces increased growth with BRAC and other opportunities for economic growth, we must ask ourselves the questions, “Are we positioned to meet the consumption and quality of life that our growing community will aspire to?” “Is the rich diversity of our natural, local environment protected today and tomorrow?”

As our community moves toward sustainability it will evolve, and that evolution will include more development and a changing economy and social character. Our development however should strive to enhance what already exists --strengthening the links between our economy, environment and society. As we move toward sustainability, we will stumble, businesses will fail and people will lack basic necessities. Our air quality will still need improvement. Embracing a more sustainable approach, however, will mean that we rise to our challenges with solutions that consider all three parts of the community instead of applying a quick fix in one area that causes problems in another.

With this in mind, we hope you will join us on a weekly journey of sustainability – a joint effort. Future articles will include a communication line – so let us know what you think. We

would appreciate your feedback and would be interested in knowing what topics you would like to have us explore.