

Article published Jan 4, 2008

Building a sustainable Tallahassee

Greenovation group takes the next step

Bill Berlow
Associate Editor

In mid-2006, I visited the ancient, biblically significant — and dead — city of Ephesus, and was left with an overwhelming sense of awe and sadness.

My awe was inspired by the city's still-apparent magnificence and sophistication. My sadness was that its inhabitants, people like us with hopes for the future and concerns about the present, no doubt assumed without giving it much thought that Ephesus would last forever.

Their home, located in what is now Turkey, was a metropolis in the Roman empire, a city of 250,000 or more and among the best the ancient world had to offer in culture, technology and learning. But 1,500 years ago, after river silt filled its harbor, Ephesus couldn't sustain itself.

It collapsed, joining a long line of societies through history that folded in the face of environmental and economic crisis.

I couldn't help but think of the challenges facing us today, not just globally but locally, too.

My June 16, 2006, column expressed Ephesus' strongest impact on me: "But if we don't start to think more sustainably — coming up with better policies and strategies for conservation, recycling, redevelopment and environmental protection — future generations will see us the way we moderns see Ephesus. A fascinating memorial to a bygone era."

Welcome to Sustainable Tallahassee.

Since the spring of 2007, I've been part of a volunteer organization called Greenovation, one of several yearlong economic-development projects to grow out of the Knight Creative Communities Initiative in Tallahassee. Greenovation's goal is ambitious: Make Tallahassee and the surrounding region a capital for green business, technology and living.

Its catalyst team understood that it was important to reach high but also be realistic. We knew we couldn't achieve our goal in a year, but we believed that we could lay a strong foundation for continuing the work.

We knew that by the end of our project's timeline we'd have to pass the baton to a viable organization that would build on the momentum we've established through various partnerships with both local governments, the Leon County school district, the Chamber of Commerce and several private businesses and individuals who've donated services, time and money.

Unless that vehicle was operational when Greenovation technically ceased to exist, we knew we couldn't be successful. So we hatched an idea and enlisted a core group of volunteers to breathe life into it.

And now Sustainable Tallahassee, soon to be incorporated and nonprofit, is almost ready for launch.

In February, we'll roll out a Web site whose aim is to eventually provide information at all levels about green resources and opportunities throughout the community: businesses that sell green products; guidance on conservation programs in government, schools and the private sector; connecting green-minded home buyers with builders who also care about sustainable living; providing existing organizations with information from like-minded groups seeking similar goals.

"Sustainable Tallahassee will be a one-stop site where people can go and share information about what their group is doing or learn about what's happening in education, government or business," said Kristin Dozier, ST's chairwoman and the green building adviser for Mad Dog Design & Construction Co.

"There's a growing recognition that focusing on a sustainable lifestyle, sustainable development, a sustainable economy, is the way to approach many of the problems we're dealing with now. That will promote economic development here in Tallahassee through green-collar jobs, and will also help develop a more attractive community."

Marpan Supply owner Kim Williams, who's about to launch his own a multimillion-dollar recycling and reuse operation, gave \$2,900 to create the Web site and make Sustainable Tallahassee operational.

Williams and others understand that sustainability isn't the monopoly of environmentalists who care passionately about preservation or business people whose main concern is the bottom line or those of any single political persuasion. That's been evident from the broad range of people who've already participated in some way with our Greenovation project — business folks, environmentalists, educators, retirees, high-school students, Republicans and Democrats.

Williams was attracted to ST's promise to promote partnerships, synthesize resources instead of compete with those providing them, and, most importantly, collect and centralize information. "I have spoken to a number of groups, and I'm constantly amazed at the number of people who say, 'Gee, I didn't know that!' " he said.

With only three months to go before Greenovation ends, our immediate challenge is to migrate our efforts so far from Greenovation to Sustainable Tallahassee. These include a significantly

expanded recycling program in Leon County Schools; a park-and-ride transit program; a business recycling partnership with the Chamber; ongoing green partnerships with Tallahassee and Leon County; and what we're calling a "Greener Business Bureau," which Tallahassee Memorial CEO Mark O'Bryant is spearheading.

Our next Greenovation meeting on Tuesday, Jan. 15, will be pivotal, and we're eager for anyone with even a sliver of curiosity to attend. (We're meeting from 5 to 8 p.m. at City Hall.)

"It's important to think about sustainability as not just an environmental cause," said Dozier, 32. "It's about our quality of life, our economic stability, our national security, our health. Sustainability is an approach to living that integrates all these different aspects of our lives."

Whatever your passion, sustainability in the long run is really about survival — something the last people to leave Ephesus would now understand.