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The Path to Washington
Convening leaders for an ecologically sustainable America
Report on a Grass Roots Dialogue
The Pyle Center, Madison, Wisconsin
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They were as young as high school junior Roland Will and as old as retired biochemist Will Sandstrom. One biked from a nearby neighborhood and another drove 90 miles to speak out. They were all in Madison at the first of what is expected to be three dozen “grassroots dialogues” around the country to talk about what is right – and wrong – about the current system for solving our nation’s environmental problems.

During the two hour discussion, the people made a statement: Give it back to us. Give back responsibility for the environment to the communities of people living and caring in its midst. Democratize responsibility for the environment by giving power, resources and control to the people who approach the issues full of ideas, hope, collaborative spirit, self-interest and energy, regardless if making change is as hard to do as making a wave in a sea of peanut butter, as one participant offered. The people said they have capacity beyond government to not only reduce environmental damage but make things environmentally better than the minimums required by government.

This message of democratizing environmental responsibility was the first of what is expected to be many statements that will be sent to Washington, D.C., in 2009, as part of the Path to Washington (PTW). The PTW is a three-year effort by the Multi-State Working Group on Environmental Performance to produce a new set of legal and policy tools to help solve our serious environmental problems, improve ecological conditions, and sustain communities and quality of life. Those tools will be presented in a report to the nation in 2009 by MSWG, a multi-sector network that promotes environmental innovation and collaboration. The new legal framework assumes that the basic environmental minimums will be maintained and enforced but there need to be better ways, in law, to encourage and support going further than the minimum and restoring ecological damage from the past.

The grassroots dialogues that began in Madison are organized specifically to get input on “the Path” from NGOs, private citizens and other often unheard voices, according to the main organizer, Eric Uram of Headwater Consulting. Uram dubs the effort a NGO Circuit Rider Project, so named because the template from Madison will be applied in the other dozens of hearings around the country.

Building on the theme of “Ecological Federalism,” Professor Donald Moynihan challenged the group to understand its potential role in changing the debate on future environmental decisions. Moynihan, a public affairs professor at the UW-Madison La Follette School of Public Affairs which co-sponsored the event, is a nationally recognized expert on citizen participation, new governance, and groundbreaking network theory. (The entire presentation is in a video which is linked to from www.mswg.org/path_to_washington/)

Moynihan offered that something could be gained by thinking of our environmental issues – and other societal problems -- in a “center and edge” relationship. While he said policies and law are set at the center, the actual work and implementation is done at the edge, i.e., locally. Approaching problems with that understanding opens up a variety of new collaborations.

The group responded to Moynihan by focusing on four questions raised by Uram:

- 1) What are the ecological needs of the locality, region or state?
- 2) What national policies are needed to support leveraging environmental leaders or others to help meet those needs and prevent abuses of any new system?
- 3) If Washington does not act, what can be done now in communities and states?
- 4) How can citizens help meet those needs?

The participants told their stories and concerns, including:*

- They want a vocabulary that captures the problems and opportunities in agreed-upon terms. They want engagement. They want measures.
- They are concerned that change only happens in a crisis.
- They are concerned about the impact of federal incentives, e.g. the Farm Bill.
- They are concerned about incentives and disincentives that result in our automobile-based society.
- They are worried about energy/climate/global warming; about water; about biodiversity. In each case, we are missing information, insights or tools to act responsibly. They are worried old strategies do not work for modern day complexity.
- They are worried about the speed of change and the need to meet the basics of everyday life: food, water, security and safety, equity and justice. They are worried about approaching environmental problems from a “silo” perspective rather than a holistic perspective.
- They are worried about how to empower people and institutions to solve problems.
- There is a need for a learning approach that is usable by average people to know how they interact with the environment, e.g., personalized environmental footprint information or an ecological vitality index like the Dow Jones.
- They said there are two ways to make change: communication and policy.
- They want to move away from a fear-based system to one with higher values of motivation and incentives.
- They want to re-frame policy discussions about government that do not de-value its role. They want to make participation in government rewarding for common citizens.
- They want to make the economy a subsidiary of the environment, not the other way around.
- They want personal incentives for better ecological behavior.
- They want full and open pricing on consumer goods and options (e.g., the water it takes to make meat, food consumed after being shipped hundreds of miles, gas.).
- They want new green tax policies that reflect consumption (wealth, not income; land use, not land) and give radical incentives to lifestyle change.
- They want to get people to look at the whole community for what it can do for itself, even if there is no related federal or state policy. They want to enable democracy for true public participation and consensus.
- They want data to be place based and relevant so they can solve problems.
- They want involvement from churches on vital issues.
- They want leadership and political will displayed by top government officials.

- They want to get business on board, encouraging them by good examples of what is happening on the edge.
- They want to allow flexibility if assurances are made that can be guaranteed through transparency and accountability.

After the group expressed its ideas, Professor Pete Nowak of the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies gave a summary benediction. He urged the group to think about working at “the edge,” which he said amounted to an organic model for thinking and solving problems. He said that is where problems can realistically be solved. He also urged them not to be too quick to judge others motives, being sure to accept diversity of ideas and avoid lazy thinking. (For his full remarks, see www.mswg.org/path_to_washington/)

Uram said the discussion was a “wonderful start toward opening a dialogue of consequence with parties of consequence.”

* A more complete and robust description of the items discussed, as well as a participant list, will be posted on the MSWG website: www.mswg.org/path_to_washington/