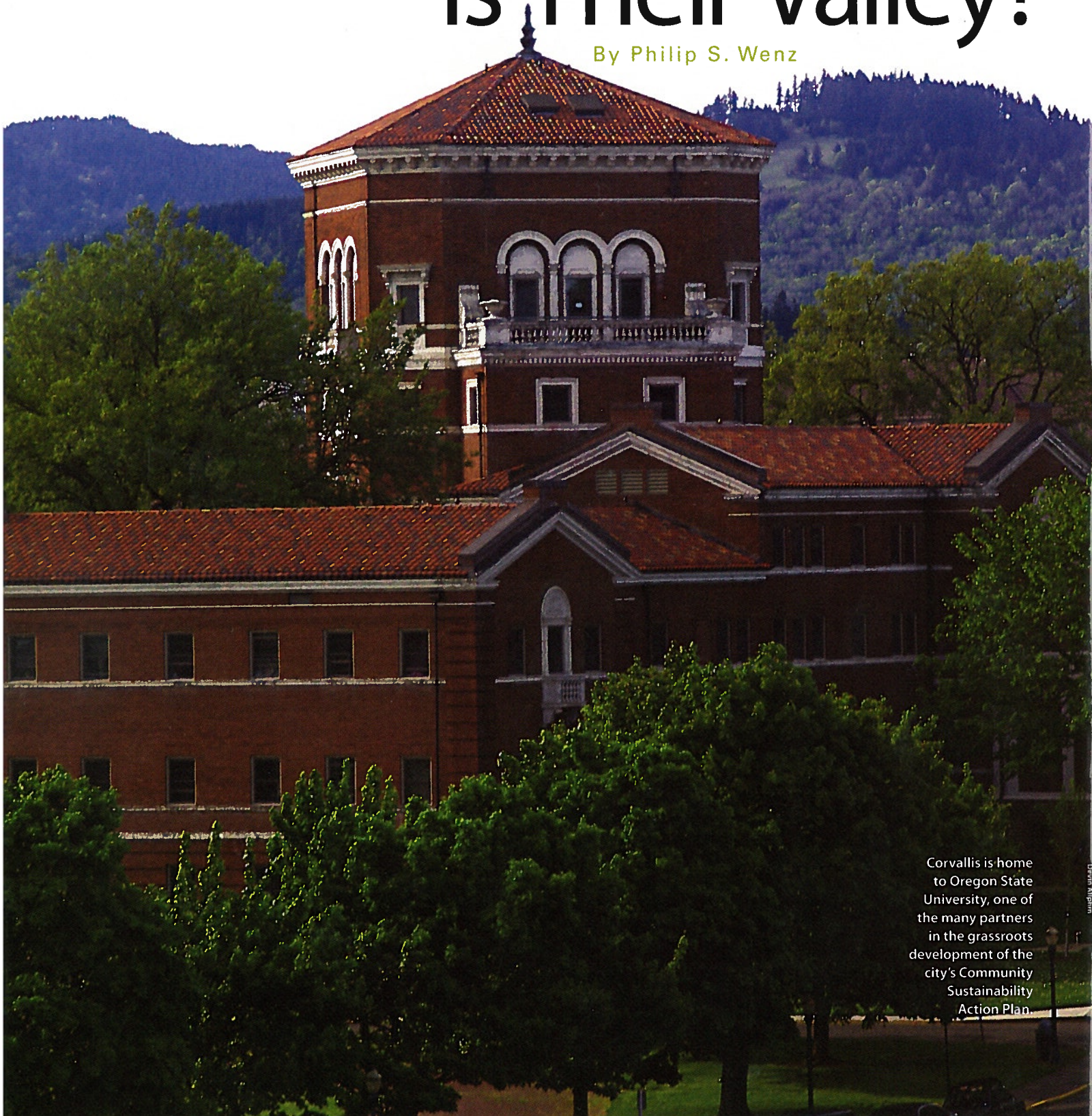


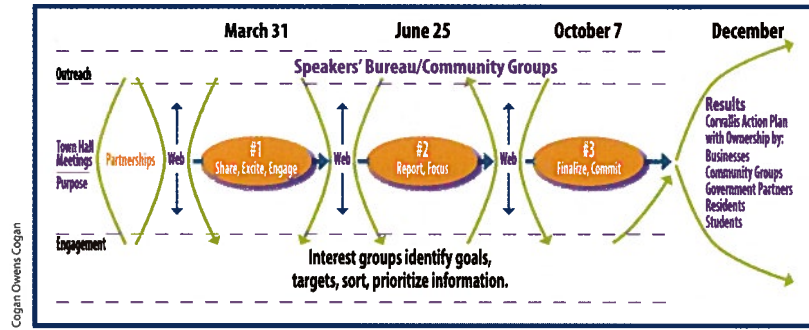
How Green Is Their Valley?

By Philip S. Wenz



Corvallis is home to Oregon State University, one of the many partners in the grassroots development of the city's Community Sustainability Action Plan.

Action Planning Process



With hundreds of volunteer participants, the Corvallis Sustainability Coalition's effort required a very organized planning process, which was led by the firm Cogan Owens Cogan. The main events were last year's three town hall meetings.

The need for comprehensive sustainable development planning is more urgent than ever. Yet city budgets are tighter than they've been in decades, and many cities—especially smaller ones—don't have the money to hire outside consultants for major planning initiatives.

In Corvallis, Oregon (pop. 55,000), the intersection of urgent need and scarce resources has led to a different idea: harnessing the vision and energy of the community at large to create a sustainability plan. The process took two years and the efforts of hundreds of volunteers. In December of 2008, the final draft of the plan was presented to the city council, which accepted it for review and potential adoption as policy.

At the request of the city, the plan was created entirely by volunteers of the Corvallis Sustainability Coalition, a network of 135 local organizations. (The city's planning department did not take part in creating the plan, though planners and other city employees participated as private citizens.)

The coalition's members have expertise ranging from ecology and hydrology to city planning, architecture, filmmaking, journalism, and organic gardening. Since the coalition was formed in January 2007, its members have spent tens of thousands of hours at town hall meetings, in committees, and on e-mails and web postings.

What they produced—the Community Sustainability Action Plan—includes specific long-term goals and strategies for attaining them. The plan is a fairly comprehensive blueprint for Corvallis's sustainable development—subject, like all blueprints, to modification over time.

How it all came about

Nestled against the Pacific Coast mountain range on the west side of Oregon's agriculturally productive Willamette River valley, Corvallis is a cross between an all-American small town and a sophisticated university community. Downtown businesses include a French restaurant, a fishing-tackle shop, an environmental center, and a livestock-and-poultry feed store, all within a few blocks of each other.

Cars, bicycles, joggers, and, occasionally, a John Deere tractor pass along the same street while onlookers sip lattes at sidewalk cafes. The town is bordered by farms and open country, not suburbs, and horses still graze in fields within the city limits.

The Oregon State University campus occupies about 570 acres in the heart of the community. It anchors the Corvallis economy with 20,000 students and 4,000 faculty and staff that received \$194 million in research funding last year. The university also provides extension classes in global warming action, organic gardening, and sustainable agriculture, and it offers community outreach through programs such as its Environmental Health Sciences Center and numerous other centers and institutes.

In recent years the university has increasingly emphasized sustainable development in its academic programs and research. On its campus, it has built a LEED gold-certified engineering building, renovated a historic dorm to LEED silver status, and initiated several conservation programs. There are both student and faculty sustainability associations.

Over time, Corvallis has attracted numerous research, development, and engineering firms, such as a large Hewlett Packard research and development facility and the headquarters of the international engineering firm C2HM Hill, which increasingly emphasizes sustainable design in major infrastructure projects here and abroad. Corvallis also is home to the Western Ecology Division Office of the Environmental Protection Agency and several state and county environmental offices. It's not surprising that Corvallis has an abundance of citizen activists who are dedicated to improving their community's environment.

Their opportunity to do so arose because of a long-standing tradition of open communication and cooperation between the city government and the citizens. That tradition was formalized in 1997, when the city council approved its 2020 Vision Statement—a document that looked more than two decades ahead and eventually set the groundwork for the Community Sustainability Action Plan.

According to Betty Griffiths, a former city council member



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and now a cofacilitator of the Corvallis Sustainability Coalition, the vision statement evolved from the work of nearly 2,000 community volunteers. Describing the Corvallis of 2020 as a vibrant, diverse regional center, the vision statement called for strong environmental protections and sustainable infrastructure. Like most vision statements, this one did not offer strategies for reaching particular goals, nor did it offer a definition for a sustainable city, but many of the topics discussed in the statement were revisited in the Community Sustainability Action Plan.

The vision statement also anticipated even greater citizen involvement in the years ahead, predicting that “[by 2020] Corvallis has a highly participatory government that when necessary, accepts higher costs and extended time periods for making decisions in order to maximize citizen involvement. . . . Citizens help decide what ought to be done, as well as how and when it will be done.”

Between 2001 and 2006, a local grassroots sustainability effort gained momentum. Maureen Beezhold and Bruce Hecht, the coordinators of two closely related organizations, The Northwest Earth Institute and the Oregon Natural Step Network, lobbied a receptive city council to adopt sustainable policies and use the Natural Step Framework as its guideline.

The Natural Step Framework delineates fundamental principles of sustainability upon which policy can be based. Created by a team of Swedish scientists, it has been adopted by at least 60 municipalities in Sweden, and a network of Natural Step organizations has expanded to seven countries, including the U.S. Although the city did not adopt the Natural Step Framework verbatim, it did adopt “an overarching goal of sustainability” in 2003.

The next significant milestone came in late 2006. By then, nationally known players such as the Audubon Society and Sierra Club as well as the local Greenbelt Land Trust and Sustainable Builder’s Network were active in the city. Beezhold and Hecht, realizing that community sustainability could be advanced more quickly if the many groups worked together, invited 40 group representatives to a meeting to discuss forming the Corvallis Sustainability Coalition.

Beezhold and Hecht also joined forces with Charlie Tomlinson, a city council-

man who was elected mayor in 2006 and quickly moved forward with a sustainable agenda. Tomlinson asked Beezhold and Hecht to make the creation of the Community Sustainability Action Plan part of the discussion at the grassroots coalition’s charter meeting.

The coalition was formed in January 2007 under the auspices of the nonprofit Oregon Natural Step Network. It was led by a steering committee with representatives from the city council, the university, business groups, and community organizations. The coalition’s first cofacilitators were Betty Griffiths and Annette Mills, the president of the Corvallis League of Women Voters.

By last fall coalition membership had grown to a total of 135 businesses, nonprofits, faith communities, government entities, and educational institutions. Included in the mix were a bank, the Corvallis school district, Oregon State University, the regional medical center, the chamber of commerce, a land developer, and a winery.

Preeminent among those partners was the city of Corvallis, which joined the coalition early on and provided \$55,000 in funding. The money, according to Griffiths, was for “the development of a sustainability action plan—including hiring a professional consultant to assist [in] designing and carrying out a public process and writing a final plan.”

With that \$55,000, the city leveraged the time, energy, expertise, and creative ideas of at least 600 community members.

What the people want

In 2008, the coalition hired Cogan Owens Cogan of Portland, Oregon, as its community-process consultant. Members of the coalition steering committee working with the firm organized three highly structured town hall meetings, held in March, June, and October 2008.

Those meetings each had a specific purpose: the first to share thoughts and to excite and engage potential recruits for the work groups (committees) that would formulate the sustainability action plan; the second to report on work group progress and focus on the remaining work; and the third to finish the work groups’ reports and to form action teams that would begin implementing the plan.

Six hundred people gathered at the alumni center on the university campus for the first meeting, and broke out into brainstorming sessions followed by guided discussions. Some 200 volunteers signed up for 12 work groups: community inclusion, economic vitality, education, energy, food, health and human services, housing, land use, natural areas and wildlife, transportation, waste and recycling, and water.

What’s the plan?

Each work group was asked to provide a vision statement for its topic area and several goals with timelines, measurable results, strategies for reaching the goals, and one or more actions to enable each strategy.

The water work group’s first goal reads this way: “By 2050, there will be a 50 percent reduction in the water flow (quantity) from 2008 annual levels through the Corvallis municipal water systems.”

One of the three strategies for achieving that goal is to “implement technologies that reduce annual flow through drinking, sanitary and storm water systems.” An action to enable the strategy is to promote alternative sewer technologies—such as gray water reuse, composting toilets, and Living Machines—for existing buildings and to require such technologies for new buildings. (See “Spigot to Spigot” in the August/September 2008 issue for a discussion of Living Machines.)

The steering committee asked the work groups to conduct extensive research be-

resources

IN PRINT

The Natural Step For Communities: How Cities and Towns Can Change to Sustainable Practices, Sarah James and Torbjorn Lahti, New Society Publishers, 2004.

ONLINE

Corvallis Sustainability Coalition: www.sustainablecorvallis.org. City of Corvallis: www.ci.corvallis.or.us/index.php. Oregon Natural Step Network: www.ortns.org.

fore arriving at their conclusions. “Members of the water work group consulted with local and state [water] experts in the development of these goals, strategies, and actions, honed them, and sent them for review to these experts,” says participant Dave Eckert.

The work groups were also asked to apply the coalition’s guiding objectives, adapted from the Natural Step Framework, to their deliberations. Annette Mills, who served on the waste and recycling work group, said that the second guideline, reading “reduce and ultimately eliminate our contribution to and dependence upon persistent chemicals and wasteful use of synthetic substances,” was particularly helpful to their group as they formulated a goal and strategies related to hazardous waste disposal.

Many of the groups’ goals and strategies included educational components ranging from launching websites to establishing a permanent sustainability center for coordinating and disseminating sustainability education to all sectors of the community by 2010. The education work group proposed that “by 2015, 100 percent of area school districts and private schools [will] integrate sustainability concepts into their curricula.”

Several groups called for surveys of the existing building stock, Corvallis’s photovoltaic system potential, land, wildlife, and even its people and their cultural affiliations. The community inclusion group recommended coordinating “a high-profile series of events around a ‘culture-of-the-month’ theme” as a way to promote diversity.

Some of the goals were admittedly ambitious. The food group proposed that “by 2020, 60 percent of the food consumed . . . is grown or produced [locally].” When asked about that figure at a public presentation, food group cofacilitator Anna Cates said the group reached that consensus after consulting numerous local agricultural and business experts. She pointed out that currently only two percent of Corvallis’s food is produced locally, so getting even half way to the goal would be a huge improvement.

A number of city staffers participated in the town hall meetings and work groups. Mayor Tomlinson facilitated a discussion group at the first town hall meeting. Steve Rogers, the director of public works, cofacilitated the transportation group, and Jason Yaich, an associate planner, partici-

pated in the housing group.

According to Yaich, “Corvallis prides itself on its citizen input. It was interesting for me as a planner to partake in a planning process from the community’s point of view.”

There were many areas where the groups’ recommendations overlapped and sometimes contradicted one another. According to Paul Smith, who served on both the transportation and energy work groups, there was an initial perception that the former’s goal of increasing the number of electric vehicles contradicted the latter’s goal of reducing electrical consumption.

As it turns out, the vehicles would likely increase Corvallis’s electrical consumption by around eight percent, and that deficit could be addressed with increased photovoltaic electrical production. Overlapping and contradictory goals will be addressed by the ongoing action teams and city staff as they implement the comprehensive plan.

Focus on the future, action now

The preliminary work of the 12 groups was presented for review by the general public at the second town hall meeting. The completed goals, strategies, and actions were approved by the steering committee and then presented at the third town hall meeting, where the attendees voted for the goals they thought should be given priority for implementation.

With their work complete, the work groups were dissolved, though many of the volunteers will continue working with the coalition’s action teams, which were being organized toward the end of 2008. “Each team will be asked to select at least

Corvallis Sustainability Coalition’s guidelines adapted from the Natural Step Framework

Our community will:

1. Reduce and ultimately eliminate our contribution to fossil fuel dependence and to wasteful use of scarce metals and minerals. Use renewable resources whenever possible.
2. Reduce and ultimately eliminate our contribution to dependence upon persistent chemicals and wasteful use of synthetic substances. Use biologically safe products whenever possible.
3. Reduce and ultimately eliminate our contribution to encroachment upon nature (e.g., land, water, wildlife, forests, soil, ecosystems). Protect natural ecosystems.
4. Support people’s capacity to meet their basic needs fairly and efficiently.

one quick win (an action that can be accomplished by January 2010) and one big win (an action that will have big impact),” says Annette Mills. The teams will report quarterly to the steering committee in 2009, and the first annual town hall meeting will be held in January 2010, to re-engage the wider public.

Meanwhile, Mayor Tomlinson appointed a committee to review the goals, strategies, and actions and determine where they overlap existing and proposed city policy. Portions of the plan are expected to undergo modification as it is adopted as policy and implemented by the city and community. Coalition spokespersons and city council members alike call it a “living document,” and the council praised it as significant step in Corvallis’s ongoing sustainable development.

Kirstin Greene, AICP, a principal with consultant Cogan Owens Cogan and its main liaison to the coalition, summed up their work together: “What I would say is this is definitely the most ambitious and extensive community-based sustainability action planning project that we and our partners have ever heard of.”

For their promotional flyers and public presentations the coalition coined the slogan, “Focus on the Future, Action in the Present.”

They mean it.

Philip S. Wenz is the former director of the Ecological Design Program at the San Francisco Institute of Architecture. He now lives in Corvallis, Oregon, where he is a marketing consultant for emerging green technologies and writes a syndicated newspaper column called “Your Ecological House.” He attended the Corvallis Sustainability Coalition’s town hall meetings and served briefly as a volunteer on two of its committees.