

# Citizens Forming Sustainable Communities Network

By Miles Jager

Each year as the High Country continues to grow, so too does the topic of growth, with more citizens and groups involved in searching for the balance between development and preservation.

That positive trend is going to continue, according to Steve Owen, president of the newly formed Appalachian Coalition for Just and Sustainable Communities.

Incorporated as a non-profit corporation in October, the coalition is now "building its membership base throughout the Appalachian region," Owen said, joining with other community and educational groups working on the many issues surrounding sustainability.

"We are part of a larger effort - Citizen's Network for Sustainable Development in Washington, D.C. - working for sustainable development here in the Appalachian Region and around the world," Owen said.

Like many in the field, Owen thinks the current global trend "tends to be going backwards" with its continuing reliance on unsustainable sources and economic policies that damage communities and the environment.

"We are not achieving that balance between the private sector, civil society, and government," Owen said, instead relying on forms of economic development that cause "degradation;" human, social and environmental.

In the Southern Appalachian region as elsewhere where citizens are trying to craft their own future, "you have to look at the basic resources;" - human, social, and environmental - and emphasize the relationships between them.

"Too often we are not seeing that economy, society and ecology are connected," Owen said.

In 1992, the first Earth Summit was convened in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, producing the document Agenda 21, with signatories including both governments and non-governmental organizations (NGO's) "agreeing to prioritize sustainable development as a global imperative."

Ten years later in Johannesburg, South Africa, many of the same participants met again to discuss implementation of the plan, with both governments and citizens playing equally key roles.

They also agreed "the translation of the goals must ultimately take place at the local level."

Owen and fellow High Country resident Andrea Capua just attended the United Nations 11<sup>th</sup> Session of the Commission on Sustainable Development in New York as official NGO delegates from the Southern Appalachian Region. There they chaired the first Sustainable Communities Caucus attended by delegates from

around the world.

Key speakers included U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annon who talked on War, the Media, and Sustainable Development, Owen said.

Much of local involvement in these issues has derived through the formation of the Appalachian State University Goodnight Family Sustainable Development Program, started by Dr. Jeff Boyer of the Department of Anthropology 12 years ago.

Since that time an average of 100 students a year have either graduated or taken as a minor this unique program of courses, and collaborated in numerous cooperative community projects.

"The focus is on community," Capua said, addressing issues like "how much money made in the county is going out of the county," Boyer said.

"With globalization

communities lose their control over production," Boyer said; "we are interested if traditional mountain self-sufficiency is being lost, although there are many good indicators here, especially in small horticultural production."

The educational component for sustainable development in the United States (Chapter 36 of Agenda 21) is actually being created at Appalachian State, with one of Boyer's students Evan Moody taking the lead.

Moody is worried that he does not see "more awareness of the situation" among students.

He believes further that the current state of global affairs "is so extreme that more people will be able to see it."

"There is a crisis of perception," Owen said, with media feeding pre-conceived notions that help make society "supportive of the things that are destroying us."

Each community needs to "know its footprint, which is the flip side of carrying capacity," Owen said; "the sum of the resources they consume in relation to the resources available, and whether they can be sustained for future generations."

Controversy over war and other policies can so easily produce the exact opposite, a fragmentation of traditionally strong communities like the High Country where "all sides can get entrenched around a set of ideas," and in the polarization "nobody wins and everybody loses," Owen said.

Everybody shares in "looking for something that makes sense in their lives and that helps the human community," Boyer said. "We are all involved in the concept of quality of life."

The Appalachian Coalitions for Just and Sustainable Communities can be reached at 828-266-3391 or go to <http://appcoalition.org>.

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