

## The Green Grapevine #21

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# Yellow Wood: Charting a Path to Durable Communities

by

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If new technology is the engine of the “green revolution,” the art and science of sustainable community development is where the rubber meets the road. For example, if people don’t know about a renewable energy technology, and don’t make use of it, it can’t provide the juice or environmental benefits. A social process is required to bring it into people’s lives.

Sustainable community development is a part of Vermont’s green enterprise sector that bridges the gap between gadgets and human beings. It requires psychology as much as technology, along with an understanding of social institutions and how economics, jobs, ecology, natural resources, and values figure in the pursuit of sustainability.

Yellow Wood Associates of St. Albans is a small firm, but it’s become one of Vermont’s leaders in sustainable development consulting. Shanna Ratner, its founder, has a round face, short dark hair, and an intellect with the cut of a scalpel and the punch of a howitzer. Don’t be misled by her caffeinated way of talking about her work; she’s not propelled by coffee. She’s *into* this. And she very much wants you to know about new tools and techniques for putting communities on the right path.

During college, Shanna traveled and lived in small towns throughout the U.S., studying rural value systems in relation to settlement patterns. She realized that “People who live in rural areas ought to be the principal stewards of the natural resource base. But that power has been largely taken away.” Historical trends

have given more control to cities, governments, and corporations.

She founded Yellow Wood to help rural communities to make their own choices about their futures and to live more self-sufficiently and securely within their resource base.

How? Well, as Joni Michell put it, you don’t know what you got ‘til it’s gone – so it’s probably a good idea to know what you’ve got. Shanna designed her Green Community Technologies (GCT) program, a process tool for municipalities wanting to plan for and invest in sustainability, to begin with an inventory.

What does your town have, and what shape are those holdings in? GCT looks at everything -- buildings, roads, water systems, sewage plants, parks, streetlights, town forests. How’s the boiler in town hall doing? What’s the treatment plant’s capacity, and how soon will the town outgrow that capacity?

Once the inventory is completed, GCT considers priority concerns the town must face -- or chooses to face. A town may need to replace stormwater management infrastructure; or, it might elect to consider its energy use and how to transition to renewable alternatives. Guided by community input, Yellow Wood suggests alternative, green technologies that can meet identified needs.

“There are many more alternatives out there than most people realize,” Shanna says. “And the best person to help towns learn about the alternatives is one without a vested interest in what choices they make.” Yellow Wood isn’t hawking a particular brand of furnace or type of paving; their job is to provide an unbiased list of best options.

The choices aren’t always obvious. So Shanna’s team takes a whole-systems view, looking for greener options in creative ways. Suppose town hall’s furnace is ready for its last rites. The town could spend \$40,000 on a new heating system of the current capacity; but it might be wiser to invest \$20,000 in insulation and new windows, and only \$20,000 in a smaller furnace that consumes less energy because it doesn’t have as much heating to do.

The town of Richmond offers several examples. During its GCT process, the town identified several priority concerns. For the stormwater system, the GCT team suggested repaving parking lots with porous concrete. By allowing more stormwater to absorb naturally into the ground, porous concrete can often permit installation of a smaller, cheaper stormwater management system.

The GCT process entails extensive economic analysis, looking at the cash value of investment options in terms of life cycle economics. Communities are, we hope, in business in perpetuity; when they buy equipment or infrastructure, they should consider the

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investment's economic impact over its entire duty life. In Richmond, Yellow Wood found that installing new lighting, heating system, and insulation in the town office building would save \$75,000 in energy bills over 25 years – in addition to environmental benefits.

Environmentalists often say, anxiously, “We need to cram 50 years of evolution into the next five years!” Facing dwindling oil reserves and global warming, we have a shrinking window of time in which to rectify past mistakes.

The infrastructure that undergirds our lives uses a huge amount of energy and powerfully impacts the environment. And fixing or replacing it ain't easy, cheap, or fast. So the time to invest in sustainability is ASAP. With access to phenomenal new technological resources and innovative approaches to community planning, we may be able to hasten our evolution after all.

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