Building Sustainable Communities

Who’s at the table?

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In building community the first logical step is to connect with people who are similar to us. People who have something in common can often build community quite easily. For many people in the Brattleboro area a community can be made up of friends who spend time doing activities together or supporting each other. In the case of Post Oil Solutions, community was initially made up of people who were concerned about a post oil world and wanted to act on this issue. This community has done some wonderful things together and we celebrate that success.

As we look around at this Post Oil Solutions community we see that most people are white and most are middle- to upper-middle class. As we have deepened our understanding of sustainable communities, we have learned that it isn’t possible without social justice. For a community to be sustainable it is important that everyone -- rich, poor, white, black, and brown -- is working together to meet the needs of all. In addition, we see a need to break down a "helping" mentality and start practicing solidarity, which means that we are all in this together. We also need to acknowledge that "My well-being is tied up with your well-being."

It is a big challenge for most of us to connect with people who do not have the same background as we do. We must get out of our comfort zone and find common ground with others. Cross-class and cross-race relationships are not easy. There are centuries of distrust and stereotyping and feelings of superiority and inferiority, which we all need to overcome. But we need to continue building these relationships and the trust to work together.

In this spirit, Post Oil Solutions is being intentional about building community across class and race divides. While we have a lot to learn and practice to accomplish this, we do know that we don’t want these socially created divisions to divide us anymore. In order to build true community, we need to learn about and understand the daily reality for people of color and the poor.

Some people say they see every human being as the same, despite color of skin or socioeconomic class, but the reality is that society does not view us all equal. White-skin privilege creates a different lived experience than for people of color. People of color and low-income folks in Brattleboro have told us how police, shopkeepers, and social service agencies treat them and it is a very different experience than we have had. While we are working towards the day that we are all treated equally, we have to be realistic about the racism and classism that is still prevalent today, both in interpersonal relationships and in the institutions of society.

We feel that an attainable goal is for people to have good paying jobs, affordable quality housing, affordable quality health care, ability to choose where they want to live and shop and go, and to not face discrimination. To reach this goal, as a community we need to learn how to
work together. In addition, people at the decision-making table need to be representative of the community.

A question that often gets asked is, "Why aren’t more people of color and low income involved?" We are trying to ask in a different way, "What are we doing that is preventing people of color and low income from getting involved?" Post Oil Solutions is thinking about how to be a relevant organization to all people in the area. We aren’t there yet, and may never really get there, but we are working towards having a decision-making table with many voices.

Recently, Post Oil Solutions developed a Race and Class committee that is holding the organization accountable to its values and mission and goals. There are many things that we can do to move forward towards our goal. Our process has started with looking inward. We have done an Anti-Racist Assessment and a Class Assessment. We also have a discussion about race and class at our monthly meetings.

This is all motivating us to be better listeners to what people in our community need and then developing projects out of that need. Our main program area is building a community-based food system. In doing so, we have seen how other issues directly impact our food system. For example, unaffordable healthcare puts people in a tough spot financially. "It’s medicine or food," people have told us. Others have mentioned that when they don’t feel well, they don’t have the energy to garden or cook. Chronic and curable illnesses limit us from reaching our potential in building a community-based food system. For this reason, Post Oil Solutions is in support of the Healthcare is a Human Right Campaign. The campaign is currently collecting stories from the community to distribute widely.

Each person has a story, and that story is related to the color of their skin and the amount of money in their pocket. But no matter what those stories are, they are all linked and they all need to be told and heard if we are going to build the kind of community that meets the needs of all.

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