



## A Natural Step Case Study The North American Eco-Municipality Network



Demonstration at The Lawrenceville School, NJ where students collected all the plastic bottles used in one week.

### ECO-MUNICIPALITY NETWORK IMPROVING SUSTAINABILITY IN NORTH AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” said Margaret Mead. Many people are familiar with this quote by anthropologist Margaret Mead and perhaps some even feel that they’ve seen it a bit too often. But it’s an apt description of how a movement, taking root in the United States and Canada, is leading to transformational change toward greater community sustainability.

In less than three years, a growing network of thoughtful and committed citizens from both countries have been learning from and supporting each other as they journey toward sustainability in their communities and organizations using the eco-municipality model and The Natural Step Framework (TNS).

In June 2005, Torbjörn Lahti and Sarah James, authors of *The Natural Step for Communities: How Cities and Towns Can Change to Sustainable Practices*,<sup>1</sup> organized and facilitated

a gathering of local eco-municipality activists, officials and interested representatives from state, national, and international organizations that took place in Madison, Wisconsin.

One of the primary objectives of the gathering, hosted by the local non-profit organization Sustain Dane, was to discuss how to support emerging eco-municipality initiatives in the U.S. and beyond. Participants in the Madison Summit included activists and local officials from the Chequamegon Bay region of northern Wisconsin, Lawrence Township, NJ, Madison, WI, representatives from the Wisconsin Chapter of the American Planning Association, 1000 Friends of Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin-Extension, the national American Planning Association, Tufts University, and an international delegation of representatives from SeKom (the National Association of Swedish Eco-municipalities) and The Natural Step Canada.

Modeled after the established Swedish eco-municipality effort, a number of U.S. and Canadian organizations formed the North American Eco-Municipality Network (NAEMN). The NAEMN includes a growing list of municipal governments, academic institutions and non-profit organizations with the goal of creating more sustainable communities by sharing their expertise, resources and experiences with one another.

<sup>1</sup> *The Natural Step for Communities: How Cities and Towns can Change to Sustainable Practices*, Sarah James and Torbjörn Lahti, New Society Publishers, 2004.

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Participants learned how local governments in Sweden have used the eco-municipality model and The Natural Step Framework since the mid-1980s to make progress toward greater sustainability in their communities.

Lahti and James, together with Lars Thunberg, Chairman of the Board of SeKom, Tommy Persson, SeKom Coordinator, and Lena Bengtén representing Luleå, a SeKom member municipality, shared the story of how Swedish eco-municipalities have taken steps to protect their environment. In the process, these eco-municipalities have created jobs and strengthened their communities through transportation policies, large-scale waste reduction, economic development and broad public education and participation efforts geared toward sustainability.

These inspirational examples gave participants the sense that they too could effect change in their communities. One of the strongest impressions shared by the participants was that they didn't need to and, in fact, couldn't *afford* to wait for federal or state governments to take a leadership role. Rather, these communities realized that they could use the eco-municipality model to make progress right away.

The Madison Summit ended with an agreement among participants to form the *North American Eco-Municipality Network* (NAEMN), a network of existing and emerging eco-municipalities with partners at state, national, and international levels, designed to share information, resources and experiences.



Portsmouth, New Hampshire Natural Step study circles bring the community together to learn about sustainability

Since its creation, the NAEMN has held regularly scheduled teleconferences and set up a listserv to exchange information and resources, increase communication and cooperation among groups, support learning about The Natural Step and accelerate sustainability in participating communities. The Network's activities are co-coordinated by Lisa MacKinnon, formerly of 1000 Friends of Wisconsin, and Bryant Moroder, Executive Director of Sustain Dane.

The local communities involved include the first generation of eco-municipalities in North America — those that have already taken formal action, such as passing a resolution to commit to become an eco-municipality — and those that are still exploring the concept through study circles, task forces, workshops and other efforts.

### What is an eco-municipality?

An eco-municipality aspires to develop an ecologically, economically and socially healthy community for the long term, using The Natural Step Framework for sustainability as a guide, and a democratic, highly participative development process as the method. It becomes the driving force for involving citizens and sectors of the larger community in the process of becoming a sustainable community. An eco-municipality collaborates with other organizations regionally, nationally, and internationally, to learn from each other and to assist other communities.

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## NETWORK PARTNERS

Community members, local elected officials and representatives from:

- ⊙ Lawrence Township, New Jersey
- ⊙ Portland, Corvallis and Lake Oswego, Oregon
- ⊙ Chequamegon Bay, Jefferson County, Madison and Stevens Point, Wisconsin
- ⊙ Duluth, Minnesota
- ⊙ Pittsburgh and Vandergrift, Pennsylvania
- ⊙ Columbia, Missouri
- ⊙ Fairbanks, Alaska
- ⊙ Cambridge, Massachusetts
- ⊙ Canmore, Alberta, Canada
- ⊙ The Natural Step (Canada, International and Oregon Network)
- ⊙ Tufts University
- ⊙ Sustain Dane
- ⊙ Alliance for Sustainability
- ⊙ 1000 Friends of Wisconsin
- ⊙ Wisconsin Chapter of the American Planning Association
- ⊙ University of Wisconsin Extension
- ⊙ University of Wisconsin – Superior
- ⊙ Sustainable Lawrence
- ⊙ Vandergrift (PA) Improvement Program
- ⊙ Sustainable Pittsburgh
- ⊙ Portsmouth Listens
- ⊙ SeKom (National Association of Swedish Eco-Municipalities)
- ⊙ Sustainable Sweden Association



## THE VALUE OF THE NAEMN

The benefits of the NAEMN are as varied as the communities involved. In particular, many NAEMN partners have expressed that the very existence of the Network is a major part of its value. It provides a virtual location for connecting with other eco-municipalities, giving them inspiration and supporting their work at the local level. Partners come together to provide moral support to each other and to encourage communities that are not as far along on the path to sustainability.

The NAEMN has inspired communities to begin the eco-municipality journey, providing partners with the resources they need. This was certainly the case in the City of Madison, Wisconsin. Since 2005, several NAEMN partners have been instrumental in moving Madison's eco-municipality efforts and The Natural Step Framework implementation forward by conducting educational presentations on The Natural Step, helping to organize and facilitate advanced training of city staff and serving on an ad hoc TNS Implementation Steering Team to facilitate and support ongoing city efforts.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>For a more complete story of the City of Madison's efforts, please see The Natural Step Case Study of Madison Wisconsin at [thenaturalstep.org](http://thenaturalstep.org)

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Sustainability is not rocket science,  
it's social science. Having a "social  
location" brings us together from time  
to time to work on rebuilding the  
relationship we have with the Earth  
and with each other.

**RALPH COPLEMAN**  
SUSTAINABLE LAWRENCE,  
LAWRENCE TOWNSHIP, NEW JERSEY

## **CONNECTING THE GRASSROOTS TO THE POLITICAL STRUCTURE: PORTSMOUTH, NEW HAMPSHIRE**

For Bert Cohen, an instructor at the University of New Hampshire in Portsmouth, much of the progress he has seen in his community is attributable to the connections made both inside and outside the NAEMN. The seed for The Natural Step Framework and eco-municipality model was first planted when he was working through a neutral community convener – Portsmouth Listens, a local NGO – to get input from citizens on the city's 10-year master plan. During the process, a sustainable framework was proposed and eventually accepted. The community then obtained a funding grant and held several training sessions to introduce The Natural Step Framework to city councilors, city staff and members of the Planning Board, the Historic District Commission, Conservation Commission and School Board.

Portsmouth Mayor, Steve Marchand, created a *Blue Ribbon Committee for Sustainability* to support the community in long-term planning and municipal sustainability issues. Cohen, and his colleague Skye Maher, were appointed to the committee and used it as a platform to create the Piscataqua Sustainability Initiative (PSI) to support building grassroots constituencies for sustainability in the city and the broader Seacoast Region. PSI's main activity is organizing sustainability study circles. So far, more than 100 people have completed the eight-week study circles.

Their efforts blossomed into a regional network comprised of PSI, Portsmouth Listens and the City of Portsmouth. Cohen credits the collaboration of these three organizations with the progress that has been made, including the city manager's decision to change the city's environmental engineer position to an Environmental Engineer / Sustainability Coordinator, as well as plans for a sustainability fair for the Seacoast Region.

Cohen says that the NAEMN's regular teleconferences and resources enabled him to see the potential of the eco-municipality model in his community and how concrete change can result from it.

When I work with communities who are considering the eco-municipality approach, it is very heartening and encouraging for these new communities to learn that there is already a network of existing eco-municipalities in the U.S. and beyond. Several of these communities, as part of their own eco-municipality journey, have gone on to join the NAEMN and have contacted existing members to ask for advice and examples. The periodic conference calls have been a good way for me to keep in touch with what is happening in the existing and emerging eco-municipalities in the U.S. and to communicate this to a broader audience.

**SARAH JAMES**  
AUTHOR OF THE NATURAL STEP FOR COMMUNITIES

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## A POINT OF REFERENCE FOR A MOVEMENT

Being able to direct others to the NAEMN shows new communities working with the eco-municipality model that they are not alone. In the same way that people realize that The Natural Step system conditions<sup>3</sup> are validated by serious scientists, people appreciate that elected officials and community representatives in other cities and towns have also embraced the concept.

People appreciate that what we're doing is not so weird or unique, but that it's part of a national movement and it gives them a higher level of comfort in taking that next step. It has been useful to be able to say, "this idea or example comes from one of our sister communities in Wisconsin" that is doing the same thing.

**RALPH COPLEMAN**



Sustainable Sweden Eco-Municipality Tour participants learn from Swedish communities and return home to implement their learnings

## ACCESS TO RESOURCES

The NAEMN provides a forum for resource sharing. Some of these include:

- ⊙ Materials that explain The Natural Step Framework and process, such as *Sustainability: Step by Natural Step*, an eLearning course on sustainability that is based on The Natural Step Framework, the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association's guidebook on community sustainability planning, The Natural Step study circle guides, and the University of Wisconsin-Extension Sustainable Communities Toolkit.<sup>4</sup>
- ⊙ Samples of community-generated materials, such as local eco-municipality resolutions, sustainable project charters and other documents that illustrate how communities are implementing their eco-municipality objectives and using The Natural Step Framework in community operations, planning and management.
- ⊙ Sample presentations on The Natural Step Framework and the eco-municipality model that can be adapted to a variety of audiences and communities.
- ⊙ Information on upcoming conferences, workshops and other learning opportunities, such as the Sustainable Sweden Eco-Municipality Study Tours, the Tufts Eco-Municipality Process Leader Training and the International Eco-Municipality Conference.
- ⊙ Examples of community projects and initiatives.
- ⊙ Advice about how to initiate, structure and finance local grassroots groups, such as Sustain Jefferson, to promote and support local eco-municipality efforts.
- ⊙ Audiovisual resources, such as online videos of various eco-municipality presentations and eco-municipality tour footage.
- ⊙ Access to summer community interns from Tufts University who work with emerging eco-municipalities.

<sup>3</sup> The four system conditions are: In a sustainable society, nature is not subject to: 1) systematically increasing concentrations of substances extracted from the Earth's crust; 2) systematically increasing concentrations of substances produced by society; 3) systematically increasing degradation by physical means; 4) conditions that systematically undermine their capacity to meet their needs.

<sup>4</sup> Toward a Sustainable Community: A Toolkit for Local Government, UW Extension publication number 625.SG.0701, January 2007. <http://www4.uwm.edu/shwec/publications/cabinet/reductionreuse/SustainabilityToolkit.pdf>.

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- © Ideas on working with other local groups to incorporate sustainability principles. A NAEMN partner in Corvallis, Oregon, for example, related the story of how a Methodist church adopted The Natural Step, including how the pastor revised her job description to include sustainability as a part of her ministry.

Access to these resources has allowed NAEMN partners to educate and assist their own communities and organizations and to reach out to broader groups on a local, statewide, and international scale. Network partners have been instrumental in:

- © Initiating and coordinating lecture visits by Natural Step founder Dr. Karl-Henrik Robèrt, Lahti, James and other eco-municipality and Natural Step representatives.
- © Coordinating and marketing the Sustainable Sweden Eco-Municipality Study Tours.
- © Organizing and facilitating Natural Step study circles.
- © Presenting the eco-municipality model and The Natural Step Framework at hundreds of conferences, workshops and community events. Some of the venues at which Network participants have presented include the International Society for Community Development, the Swedish Embassy's Swedish Trade Council conference in Washington D.C., Downtown Madison Rotary, statewide municipal associations such as the Wisconsin Alliance of Cities and League of Municipalities, The Natural Step Learning Journey in Stockholm, Sweden, the American Planning Association's annual conference and many counties, cities, villages and towns across the U.S.

## **SHARING TOOLS FOR COMMUNITY CONSERVATION AND SUSTAINABILITY EDUCATION: SUSTAIN DANE RAIN BARREL DEBUTS IN LAWRENCE, NEW JERSEY**

A practical example of how particular tools and other resources are shared by the NAEMN partners comes from Sustainable Lawrence, which held a green building expo in March 2008.

Ralph Copleman, who coordinates Sustainable Lawrence, a grassroots, populist organization in Lawrence Township, New Jersey, has been focusing his organization's efforts on mobilizing the populace, rather than the formal local government. Copleman spoke with fellow NAEMN partner, Bryant Moroder, and learned about a rain barrel kit that Moroder's group, Sustain Dane, designs and distributes to promote water conservation. Copleman asked Moroder to send him a sample barrel to demonstrate it at the expo.

Lawrence Township first learned of the eco-municipality model and The Natural Step through two events in 2005. The first was the *Greening Lawrence* conference, sponsored by Lawrence Township and The Lawrenceville School, which featured Sarah James talking about eco-municipalities to citizens, local officials and staff from The Lawrenceville School. Then, in May 2005, Sustainable Lawrence hosted a full-day Natural Step and eco-municipality workshop. Several task forces formed to explore bringing sustainability to the school system, major employers and other key institutions, and municipal government activities.

## **IN-DEPTH COMMUNITY-TO-COMMUNITY OUTREACH**

Through the NAEMN, several communities and partners have been able to become more deeply involved in assisting each other with specific challenges or initiatives. One Network teleconference featured a presentation on the *Canmore Experience and Early Adopters Program* by Bart Robinson, Program Director of the Bow Valley Sustainability Hub in Canmore, Alberta, Canada. Robinson recounted how the Canmore town council unanimously declared it would support The Natural Step early adopters program in this mountain valley town of 15,000, known for its tourism, recreational and natural resources.

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Robinson's presentation highlighted the process for starting an early adopters program, where community leaders and innovators engage in a sustainability education process, and then commit to spread the ideas and actions more broadly through their community. Participants learned about the structure of the educational workshops, the funding mechanism that supported the program, specific actions and initiatives that resulted and how to engage the community and monitor progress.

The Network's Canadian partners have strongly influenced our work here in the Chequamegon Bay. Because of our connection with Canmore and the information they shared about their early adopters program, we had a solid and successful model on which to base our own program and were able to secure grant funding and put a good program in place.

**MARY REHWALD**  
CITY OF ASHLAND COUNCIL MEMBER AND  
ALLIANCE FOR SUSTAINABILITY REPRESENTATIVE

### **EARLY ADOPTERS: FROM CANMORE, ALBERTA TO THE CHEQUAMEGON BAY, WISCONSIN**

The Chequamegon Bay communities on the southern shores of Lake Superior are pioneers of the eco-municipality movement in the U.S.

Network partner, Mary Rehwald, began laying the groundwork in 2004 and 2005 after hearing a presentation by Torbjörn Lahti and attending the 2004 Sustainable Sweden Eco-Municipality Study Tour. By the time the NAEMN was formed, Rehwald and other community leaders in the region were already engaging

the broader community. Just a few months after participating in the Madison Summit, the Cities of Washburn and Ashland adopted resolutions declaring their intention to become eco-municipalities based on the Swedish model and using The Natural Step Framework. The City and Town of Bayfield soon followed suit.

As a part of this process, the Alliance for Sustainability in the Chequamegon Bay region established a regional sustainability plan, *The Sustainable Chequamegon Initiative*, and a central office. It also hired a coordinator to complement and support the official resolution actions of the four local governments in the area and to establish partnership with other local organizations.

Based on what they had learned from the Canmore experience (through Network calls, as well as an in-person visit and additional materials), the Alliance formed the *Green Team Network of Early Adopters of Sustainability*. The team comprises representatives from about 20 local businesses, the Cities of Washburn, Bayfield, and Ashland, Wal-Mart, WI Technical College-Ashland, the Bad River and Lac Courte Oreilles tribes, Washburn Iron Works, the Chequamegon Food Co-op, the Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center, the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, Northland College and a local school.

These groups joined together to learn about The Natural Step, create sustainable action plans, share their progress with each other and, eventually, share their experiences about incorporating sustainability into their business operations with others in the region.

The community sharing between the NAEMN partners didn't stop there. The Alliance for Sustainability had been successful in getting grant funding for its early adopters program and Jan Karon of Sustainable Duluth, another NAEMN partner, asked the organizers to share their knowledge of establishing and funding such a program. Since then, the Duluth group received grant funding for its local early adopters program proposal, which includes funding for a coordinator and sponsoring Natural Step training workshops for program participants.

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## RECENT SUCCESSES

Since the Madison Summit and the formation of the NAEMN, Network partners and their communities and organizations have been involved in many exciting developments. Here are just a few:

- ⊙ Formation and leadership of numerous local sustainability organizations that are educating local government leaders, businesses and the broader community, and creating initiatives to support local sustainability efforts. These organizations include Sustain Jefferson, Sustainable Duluth, the Piscataqua Sustainability Initiative, Sustain Dane and a stronger Alliance for Sustainability.
- ⊙ Passage 18 formal local government resolutions indicating an intent to become an eco-municipality and adopting or endorsing The Natural Step Framework as a guide.
- ⊙ Conducting and facilitating Natural Step study circles, which have reached hundreds of individuals in local governments and community groups across the U.S.
- ⊙ The first International Eco-Municipality Conference in Helsingborg, Sweden in May 2008 organized by SeKom to bring together eco-municipalities and their supporters from around the world.
- ⊙ Creation and coordination of community early adopters programs by Chequamegon Bay's Alliance for Sustainability in Wisconsin and Sustainable Duluth in Minnesota (based on Canmore's program).
- ⊙ Publication of *Toward a Sustainable Community: A Toolkit for Local Government*, a guide for communities that highlights the eco-municipality model and The Natural Step Framework.
- ⊙ Coordinating visits, training workshops and presentations by Dr. Robert, Torbjörn Lahti and Sarah James to communities around the U.S. and Canada.

## THE FUTURE OF THE NAEMN

The NAEMN provides valuable support for emerging eco-municipality efforts, even though it is still in its infancy and very much an informal body. The challenge ahead lies in continuing and increasing effective support for a growing group of diverse and widespread communities as interest in the eco-municipality model and The Natural Step flourishes. This growing Network must continue to have meaning and satisfy the social connections that lead to change, while recognizing that most of its partners have limited resources and time.

Over the past two and a half years, the North American Eco-Municipality Network has fostered the development and support of emerging eco-municipalities through connections, access to resources and community-to-community outreach. Given signs of accelerating interest in the eco-municipality model and The Natural Step Framework, the future promises continuing opportunities for a supportive and engaged Network.

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Sustain Dane

[www.sustaindane.org](http://www.sustaindane.org)

1000 Friends of Wisconsin

[www.1kfriends.org/Eco-Municipalities](http://www.1kfriends.org/Eco-Municipalities)

Sustainable Lawrence

[www.sustainablelawrence.org](http://www.sustainablelawrence.org)

Piscataqua Sustainability Initiative

[www.thepsi.net](http://www.thepsi.net)

Sustainable Duluth

[www.sustainableduluth.org](http://www.sustainableduluth.org)

City of Madison Mayor's website on The Natural Step

[www.ci.madison.wi.us/mayor/Natural](http://www.ci.madison.wi.us/mayor/Natural)

SeKom-Swedish Eco-Municipality Organization

[www.sekom.nu](http://www.sekom.nu)

Sustainable Sweden Association

[www.sustainableSweden.org](http://www.sustainableSweden.org)

This case study was researched and written by Lisa MacKinnon and edited by Sharon Boddy for The Natural Step Canada. Thank you to Bert Cohen, Ralph Copleman, Sarah James and Mary Rehwald for granting interviews. Creative Commons Copyright 2008 Some rights reserved.

