

THE DURANGO HERALD

Concept of sustainability: Why it is important, now and in future

by Sustainability Alliance of Southwest Colorado

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Upcoming event

A Sustainability Alliance event at 7 p.m. March 11 at the Durango Public Library will include a showing of the short film, "The Story of Stuff," then an interactive discussion "Trash Talk." This family-friendly event is free.

Editor's note: This is the first of a series of four columns the Sustainability Alliance of Southwest Colorado is writing for The Good Earth page on the last Thursday of the month. This one defines the term "sustainability."

We read about "sustainability" everywhere these days - in corporate marketing materials, on product labels, even in government legislation. But what does it really mean? The United Nations defines "sustainable development" as development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own

needs." Locally, the Sustainability Alliance of Southwest Colorado has defined a "sustainable community" as one that preserves and restores the integrity of its natural environment, nurtures healthy human and other living systems, and maintains a vital self-reliant economy, generation after generation.

Many of our current systems, from agriculture to the economy, do not function sustainably. Buying an apple that was grown with chemical fertilizers, picked when it was still green, sprayed with preservatives and transported thousands of miles in petroleum-guzzling carriers is not sustainable. Among its "hidden" costs are soil depletion, water pollution, greenhouse-gas emissions and extraction of dollars from our local community. Besides, the apple often is inferior in taste and nutrients to its local counterpart, the demand for which can support higher-value food production while keeping dollars circulating in the community.

The commitment of our economic system to unending growth has depleted water, soil and energy resources, increased atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases, and brought us closer to a world that most of us probably would not wish to inhabit. Our children will be faced with the twin challenges of a changing climate and ever-rising demands on limited resources in a crowded world.

Such trends imply that, despite being the buzzword of the moment, sustainability goes beyond buying carbon credits or the latest "green" gadget. It's not just about "buying differently" or being "less bad" for the environment. It's about tapping into our immense inner resources of creativity and innovation to redesign our wider social, environmental and economic systems to better reflect their interconnectedness and ensure their long-term health.

Such efforts are happening in our community today. They include development of our local Climate and Energy Action Plan, revision of the La Plata County Comprehensive Plan to fulfill the goals articulated in the La Plata County Compass, and revision of the Durango Land Use and Development Code in part to ensure that it aligns with the sustainability goals of the city's 2007 Comprehensive Plan.

Incorporating sustainability into our lives means incorporating it into our beliefs - suspending our "buts" and adding a dose of ingenuity. We can choose to grow more of our own food in our yards or in community gardens, or to buy from local growers. We can seek opportunities to enhance the energy efficiency of our homes and our vehicles. We can also lend our individual energy and imagination to larger efforts to conceive and create a more sustainable community.

We have a choice: either continue the present cycle of inefficiency and wastefulness, or seize the opportunity to act as individuals and as a community to embrace more balanced social, environmental and economic systems.

Sustainability begins with personal beliefs and actions and ripples across our community to the wider world to sustain both the Earth and future generations.

The Sustainability Alliance of Southwest Colorado works to promote the sustainability movement in Southwest Colorado by facilitating communication and collaboration among individuals and organizations to achieve integrated solutions. Visit www.sustainableswcolorado.org.

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