

Taking real steps toward sustainability

By Richard Anderson | Posted: Wednesday, October 1, 2014 4:30 am

“Sustainability” has been a buzzword for at least the past two decades, a fuzzy term that seems to refer to just about anything a person, group or government agency does that is perceived as good for the environment.

But there are organizations that have developed some hard and fast definitions of sustainability, chief among them the Global Sustainable Tourism Council, which started as a program of the United Nations before going off on its own.

Even more encouraging, there are organizations and communities working to meet those definitions to become certifiably sustainable.

Leading the charge in Jackson Hole is the Riverwind Foundation, an educational nonprofit founded in 1999 by Tim O’Donoghue. While the foundation went underground while O’Donoghue was executive director of the Jackson Hole Chamber of Commerce, from 2006 to 2012, he reactivated it two years ago and in short order earned Jackson Hole “early adopter destination” status through the council — one of just six in the world.

O’Donoghue talked with the News&Guide about Jackson Hole’s Sustainable Destination program. The following was compiled from several conversations with him, edited for length and continuity. For additional information visit SustainableDestination.org.

Q: What was the genesis of this project?

A: Steve Duerr [former executive director of the chamber of commerce] had introduced the concept of sustainability and that the chamber should be more than just an organization that recognizes the importance of a healthy economy, but also recognize the importance of a healthy community and a healthy environment when he introduced the Earth Charter to the chamber’s board of directors. That was in 2005, I think.

And Jonathan Schechter deserves credit, because he was one of the early people talking about sustainability. ... Jonathan produced a report called “Sustaining Jackson Hole,” published it a few years in a row, introducing the language of sustainability. I look back on his work and also on the work of the town and county governments, which atypically at the time, 2005 to 2006, was leading our community with a joint resolution to reduce carbon. ... I was the first chair of their energy efficiency advisory board. ... In this case



Tim O'Donahue

Tim O’Donoghue leads an effort to make Jackson a sustainable tourist destination.

it was the government leading the way, which is a credit to who was in the government: Mark Barron, Ben Ellis, Melissa Turley ...

Q: Was there any resistance to get involved with this?

A: I was interim executive director until they could hire someone. Then in the last week of application process I threw my hat in. In the interview process I said, "If you bring me on as ED I'd like to include in our agenda the triple bottom line and how the chamber needs to be not just about our financial and economic health but also environmental and social health, that we'll need to have a dialog that addresses the interdependence of those things." And they agreed. That was back in 2006.

Q: How did that turn into Jackson Hole's Global Sustainable Tourism Council program?

A: In the fall of 2011 the chamber applied on behalf of all of Teton County to be a destination that the international body would select to test drive the latest, most integrated set of sustainability programs in the world, and we were selected, the only one in Wyoming, one of only six in the world. So we got some notoriety ... good press in the tourism world and also in the sustainable tourism world. ...

In June 2012 we got the formal announcement [we'd been accepted], and three months later, for all of June, we were being evaluated, audited — all the entities within the political boundaries [of Teton County, which includes the southern half of Yellowstone National Park]. ... We were firehosing them with as much information as we could. ... Then a contractor came out for eight days for more meetings, interviews, audits.

Q: How did we do?

A: There is a total of 120 criteria, "indicators," and for first time ever, in September 2012, we got from a third, objective party an evaluation of where we stood with being sustainable as a destination community — here's how we stacked up economically, socially and environmentally. And there's a fourth leg: destination management, how to manage and integrate all that.

We were strong in environmental stewardship and social stewardship. ... Economically we were still climbing out of the recession relative to the rest of country and world, but we're pretty resilient. There was room to improve but we did well, except in destination management, which we flunked. We had no organized program to facilitate communication between all the different entities ... no program or organization to coordinate it to make it a unified effort. ...

In September 2012 there was a unanimous vote to ... move forward. That began a nine-month effort by myself and a handful of others that became the steering committee of our program. We developed an action plan for the first 12 to 18 months ... developed a memo of understanding that has served as the organizational basis of the council. Everyone who signs is a member of the council. ...

And I began fundraising. Through a number of grants — the Travel and Tourism Board, the Walton Family Foundation, the USDA and in-kind contributions — for our first year our budget is \$140,000. ...

We're also just about to complete and publish the results of our 1 Percent for the Tetons grant. We inventoried as much as we could all the sustainability activities in our community — about 127 stakeholders: federal, local, state, a bunch of businesses, a bunch of nonprofits — that will get published in

next month or so. . . . I won't say [we inventoried] all of them — I'm pretty confident there are more organizations and businesses out there that are actively practicing sustainability . . . but the fact that just through our nonprofit list serve we had 127 entries, that's impressive.

Q: Is sustainability part of your background or did you learn about it all as you went along?

A: Before I moved to Wyoming in the '90s, and after I moved here, I taught classes on sustainability, living simply and sustainably, deep ecology, those kinds of things. . . . My interest has always been, since high school, solar energy and forms of energy that were less polluting, less harmful to the environment and the inhabitants. It's always been an undercurrent for me for 40 to 50 years.

My professional background is I used to manage large-scale programs . . . working with many different entities and stakeholders, creating a common vision and goal. I was a contractor to NASA, and I worked to negotiate among 27 different countries about how the space station was to be operated from the ground. It was my job to facilitate that agreement among many cultures and languages and to create a document that everyone signed off on. That's what happened here, too — we have many stakeholders: government, nonprofits, schools, businesses . . .

Q: And what's the involvement of your group, the Riverwind Foundation?

A: Riverwind is the fiscal agent and the entity and the group that money from grants and donations goes through to support it.

There are other partners. . . . In addition to our board of directors, the smaller concentric circle is our steering committee, which helped with the development phase of the program. . . . They're more involved at the tactical, monthly level. There are 12 of us: Phil Cameron with Energy Conservation Works, Mac Dukart with Integrated Solid Waste, Alicia Cox, the executive director of the Yellowstone-Teton Clean Energy Coalition, Jonathan Schechter, JuliAnn Forrest, who has a public relations and marketing firm called J4 Strategies, Carli Lyon of AllTrips, Jeff Golightly, executive director of the chamber, Jason Williams of Jackson Hole Wildlife Safaris, Mike Cavaroc who heads our Dark Skies program, Jody Donovan with Teton Science Schools, Siva Sundaresan of the Conservation Alliance, Scott Steen of Slow Food of the Tetons and myself.

Q: So what's all this mean? How will this affect businesses or the community at large?

A: International recognition of Jackson Hole and Yellowstone as a sustainable destination started with our participations with the GSTC program. . . . Eventually the program will [come] back, when we've done a lot more work, and see how we stack up against the criteria again. And also then there will be more organizations that certify entire communities. We'll go after that certification. The fact that we're getting lots of recognition now in different media . . . is very promising.

And we're in process of . . . building a database. Say you responded to our online survey, you checked off areas of sustainability you're active in: using compact fluorescent, recycling, you check off waste management and so on. . . . Say you were having challenges with responsible purchasing — you don't know how to influence suppliers to provide you with more eco-friendly products. You can go to the database and see who else has that information or those challenges . . . and you guys could talk and exchange ideas and as

a group leverage a larger vendor that supplies, say, copy paper. ... A lot of entities don't have resources individually, but collectively they could if they could leverage the resources of the group. So we're helping individual businesses build partnerships. ...

We also have formed a sustainable consulting team and we're offering four training workshops to go deeper into areas, provide tools ... and we have funding to provide one-on-one technical assistance to small and emerging businesses ... to match the expertise with the needs and interests of the business.

Also we continue to evolve our website to be more dynamic in terms of functionality, downloads, tools to calculate carbon emissions, water usage. And with our Walton Family Foundation grant we plan to bring students into the system. If we want to be sustainable we need to bring the next generation along. Through the Teton Science Schools ... we're introducing sustainability into the curriculum ... offering in the last two weekends of October a sustainability summit for students. They'll take two weekends and produce a sustainability code of conduct for all residents and visitors.

Even if you don't reach all your goals, you strive toward them. Our community has the ability to do a lot of things. Most of us have been here long enough to be impressed with what we're capable of if we set our mind to it.