



Grand Marais: Sustainability on the North Shore

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August 2000

You tend to shed the city as you blur north past Duluth and hum past granite cliffs, pine forest and steel blue water that touches the horizon. Brad and I visited Grand Marais, a small city in on the north shore of Lake Superior, on different occasions. Brad Greenwood visited in December 1999 and Ernie Diedrich during the summer of 2000. Both of us were mesmerized by Lake Superior's size and brooding power. After a great late August visit, I sipped on a cup of coffee at the Cup O' Diem and reflected on Brad's visit and the people he met, as well as on my visit. The case study reflects the people we met, their successes and the development issues with which they struggle.

Waste and Tourism

Brad started his visit to Grand Marais on the morning of December 3, 1999 when he met Todd Bodem, at the time working as City Clerk, Treasurer, and on zoning issues. Bodem quickly zeroed in on a major sustainability issue for resort towns by pointing out that though Grand Marais is quiet in the winter, the town population doubles to about 2,400 during the summer months. Tourists and summer residents visit (and some stay in) Grand Marais because it is a portal to the Boundary Waters Canoe Wilderness Area and the Gunflint trail and because of the attractive harbor, numerous inner lakes, the Sawtooth Mountains range, and a huge watershed area north of town. The outdoors beckon here and tourists respond with their money as well as with their waste.

Filling up with Beauty rather than Gasoline

A project that crystallized Grand Marais' concerns with environmental quality involved the Standard gas station situated in the middle of town at the harbor's edge. It had been closed owing to pollution problems over a year and a half ago and the owner was considering several development options after deciding to quit selling gas. A group of citizens, with strong leadership from mayor Andrea Peterson, organized an effort that promised to turn an eyesore into a lovely park at the town's entrance. The gas station's owner had a turn of heart and donated \$100,000 of the asking price of the land. A successful fund-raising effort in 1999-2000 brought in \$200,000 from the public. That coupled with a \$300,000 matching grant from the Department of Natural Resources (one of the largest, single DNR matching grant ever) gave Grand Marais a key, protected segment of waterfront as a legacy for future citizens and tourists.

Once the area is landscaped, an effort to be accomplished with further donations organized



by the fund-raising committee, it will be protected by a Conservation Easement so that it can always stay a park. In fact, all the public land around the harbor and into the woods is protected through the easement as well. This project galvanized community support for conservation efforts, broadened the debate on what is "good development," and strengthened a commitment to maintain the quality of Grand Marais' further development.

Recycling Old Buildings

Bodem also mentioned that in contrast with the demolition of the old gas station, many old buildings are renovated. For example, an old fish house was transformed into the Angry Trout Café, one of the most popular restaurants in Grand Marais. Over-fishing and other destructive, non-native species have decreased fish populations so the fishery industry has declined, but two historic fish houses are still in use today, harkening back to a traditional, but declining, way of life in Grand Marais. On a more positive note, conservation efforts are helping fish reproduce keeping the two existing fisheries viable.

North House Folk School

The quiet sanding of kayak and canoe paddles signaled that the North House Folk School was in session. The Folk School was created to promote and preserve knowledge, skills, and crafts of the past and present, and through them,

to better understand the future and our role in it. "Learning is emphasized and inspired by the Scandinavian 'folkehoskoles' - where learning is valued for its own sake." The focus is on traditional methods and technologies and their application in a variety of areas.

Mark Hansen, director and proprietor, and Tom Healey, head staff person and member of the North House Board (see <http://www.northhouse.org>) talked with Brad on his visit. Healey mentioned that The North House School was built with sustainable ideas in mind: the building itself is a recycled U.S. Forest Service Building that the city traded for a section of land on which a new Forest Service Building was built.

When asked about his perception of sustainability and what people in larger cities could do to promote it, Healey argued that people could not run to cities such as Grand Marais in search of natural beauty and leave their city's problems behind. Grand Marais would probably no longer be a sustainable city if they did that, regardless of the amount of beauty that the area has to offer. "The cities themselves have to address their individual issues, and I feel that positive developments are being made." So for Healey, accepting sustainability is not really a matter of size or location, it's a matter of doing something in your own back yard.

Healey further explained that there are people in Grand Marais who are not environmentally conscious and contend that there is too much open space in town and some of the space should be developed. They grumble that ninety-two percent of the county is owned either by the federal or state

governments. Much of the land in surrounding Cook county could be developed, but a majority of the people here see value of keeping the land in its natural state and feel that this offers a greater benefit, in both the present and future, than any sort of commercial development. People who have chosen to live here realize what they've lost in bigger cities.

The Old Ski Hill

While camping near Grand Marais during the summer of 2000, a group of college students in Wolf Ridge's Superior Studies Program and I invited Jeff Kern¹ to talk to us about sustainability in Grand Marais. Kern's main concern in Grand Marais involves sustainable development, and the Ski Hill issue highlights the friction between those who wish to develop and those who wish to conserve the natural environment.

Grand Marais has a former ski hill and lodge located north on a hill overlooking the town. The property itself is now tax-forfeit and is located partially in the city limits. The Cook County/Grand Marais Joint Economic Development Authority has issued a Request for Proposal for developing a 400 to 600 acre parcel of Ski Hill land overlooking the City of



¹ Jeff has been working on the state's NE Regional Landscape Level Forestry Planning Group and served as the chair of the Assessment Subcommittee. He has recently resigned as chair, but is still actively involved with the Planning Group. Jeff also serves on the board of the University of Minnesota Northeast Region Sustainable Development Partnership. He talked with Brad in December of 1999, and this is a summary of both conversations.

Grand Marais. This property's diverse topography includes buildable land, steep slopes and rock out-crops with an escarpment dividing the property in half. It also contains wetlands, wooded and grassy openings with delicate ecosystems, established hiking trails, county road access, and majestic views of Lake Superior and the City of Grand Marais. This land is the elevated, wooded backdrop of Grand Marais as one enters the harbor from Lake Superior.

The Economic Development Authority, with a majority of members from Cook County, is looking for proposals for high-value housing that will stimulate social/economic vitality, yet remain sensitive to the natural environment and ecosystems of the area. Kern and several other community members feel that the Ski Hill area should remain green space rather than be developed.

Kern added, "Since approximately 90% of the county is public land, the remaining 10% is all we have for our tax base." Conflict occurs since a portion of the townspeople see this as negative and believe that the 10% of land remaining should be developed to its fullest capacity so that taxes are reduced. Kern disagrees. "Increasing your tax base doesn't reduce your taxes but there is still a strong community belief that if the tax base is raised, taxes will be lowered," he notes. Increased development brings with it a need for more expensive services that ultimately raise taxes not lower them.

Affordable Housing

Kern also noted that there is a problem with "affordable" housing. Grand Marais has a fair number of low paying service jobs, many linked to the tourist industry. It is difficult to live in town since the price of real estate is high compared to the low pay. Because of this, some people want more affordable housing so they can better address housing costs given

their current employment options.

A developer has made proposals for affordable housing, which would be built on the Ski Hill land. The going prices for the new units that have come in so far are in the \$150,000-\$300,000 price range, which obviously isn't affordable for the average income in town.

Buying and Thinking Locally

Sustainability in Grand Marais would increase if residents shopped less in Two Harbors and Duluth. Kern explained that since the cost of retail goods, including food, is relatively high in Grand Marais, people feel the need to drive to Duluth to buy groceries and/or supplies such as lumber. Consumers sometimes bypass the local markets and spend their money elsewhere. In addition, business people primarily drive economic development in the area and the townspeople have little input in development issues. This leads to decisions that may benefit the developer, yet have little, if any, benefits for the surrounding community and environment. Kern would rather see more time spent focusing on the community and how it should develop in a sustainable manner, rather than looking at what will bring in revenue.

Grand Marais has a mayor, but who oversees the development of the whole County? Kern regretted that there isn't a County Administrator that can keep an eye on how the entire County is developing. The overworked and underpaid County Board acts as a county administrator, but the coordination between rural and urban areas may not proceed as smoothly.

Forestry and Employment

Kern is also involved with a landscape-level forestry planning process in the Arrowhead region that is administered by the Minnesota DNR. The focus of the plan is to get some sort of continuity of effort among the landowners in the county region. Guidelines will then be administered to determine how much of each

type of forest should be maintained, and to what extent. Everyone would then be expected to adhere to that plan. Therefore, the private, commercial, county, and state landowners would be on the same page as to how they manage the forests. Kern adds, "Such an effort would allow for a more uniform understanding of how the whole picture fits together ecologically." Another goal of the effort is to prevent having ample forest area, such as in the Boundary Waters, followed by clear cutting sections.

Forestry is "...actually a rather small industry in Grand Marais." It is perceived to be rather large, however, since one of the largest private employers in the county is the lumber mill, which employs about 120 people. But much of their lumber comes from elsewhere, and forestry products make up only a small percentage of the area's total economic output.

How do other, non-forestry, folks make a living? "The most successful people here have gone elsewhere to find a good paying job that they can bring back to Grand Marais." For example, there are people who live and work in Grand Marais acting as consultants for medical or manufacturing facilities. These people are based in Grand Marais, but travel elsewhere to do their work. Once again, there aren't very many high paying jobs in town and some may have multiple jobs in order to better support themselves. The main employers in the area are the U.S. Forestry service and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. There are also some medical jobs available,

Sustainability A La Jeff

Surprisingly, Kern believes that sustainability is easier to sell in a big city versus in a small town like Grand Marais. "People look around and notice that we have all this land and all this nice green space. Issues here are tougher to define in terms of sustainability because we have such nice surroundings...in a big city,



...sustainability issues stick out like a sore thumb," and people spend more time addressing issues such as local consumption and local tax base policy. What he finds most frustrating is the fact that the trends, analyses, and studies make sense for a metropolitan area but seemingly do not apply to a smaller, more isolated community such as Grand Marais.

"How do you get people to understand? I don't know, but the problem could depend on your own definition of what sustainability really is. I see two ways of looking at it - either you have what you keep or you keep what you have."

Kern's first approach to sustainability is sustaining what the community currently has. For example, if the town has 100 jobs, it needs to maintain those 100 jobs and increase them in a stable manner to stay within the sustainable bounds. The second way of looking at sustainability is possibly needing to scale back the number of jobs that currently available. Failing to do so puts the town at risk of losing its identity through excessive growth and an influx of population and industry.

How do people learn about sustainability? Kern advocates education. "It has to do with educating people about what sustainability

means and it has to happen on many different levels." The news and media is one way of passing on information, and local schools help educate the community and reach households. Kern has helped organize and conduct public meetings and has held breakfast discussions where sustainability issues are brought up. Effective action in small towns, Kern believes, occurs when citizens talk to other citizens in a non-confrontational way at local bars or restaurants. Or they might just learn by eating at a restaurant that tries hard to practice what it preaches.



Angry Trout Café

Angry Trout Café owner George Wilkes, along with his wife Barb LaVigne, are in their own way educating and promoting sustainability in the Community of Grand Marais. Kathy LaVigne, Hospitality Director, and her husband Mike, have lived in Grand Marais for 16 years. Kathy has worked at the Angry Trout Café, which is open only during peak season from May 1st to mid October, for 8 years.

Environmentally aware owners Barb and George have taken conscious, non-traditional steps to run a restaurant that follows nature's rules.

Buying Locally

As much as is feasible, food is obtained locally. For example, any fish item offered on the menu comes directly from Lake Superior, and all vegetables are organically grown (as available). Kathy explained that a local provider is sought first, and if none can be found, they go to a Minnesota supplier. Kathy stressed, however, that the supplier's product has to meet the exact environmental standards of the café. For example, wild rice used with entrees is grown and harvested near Finland, MN.

Waste Reduction

When it comes to waste and recycling, the café has implemented methods to reduce, if not avoid, waste as much as possible. Kathy explains the following example: "In the kitchen we have 3 bins where we compost food scraps, such as coffee grounds, tea leaves, lettuce, potatoes and other vegetable peelings. One of the buckets is used for dog food for "mushers", where the composition is refrigerated until someone wants it for their sled dogs. It really takes a lot of effort to sort and refrigerate the used food, but the overall environmental benefit is what counts the most."

Another non-traditional example, which reduces waste, is food preparation and storage. Barb and George select containers for food prep and storage that are environmentally friendly or recyclable. In addition, they refuse to sell bottled or canned beer because it creates more material to dispose of. The café offers only tap beer and uses glass mugs.

Coffee to Go

Kathy recounted walking in town and sometimes finding litter from fast-food chains, even though there aren't any of these restaurants for hundreds of miles. She has

observed first hand how things get carried and thrown away, so the café will not sell a cup of coffee "to go" in a paper or Styrofoam cup.

The Angry Trout Café was the first restaurant in town to offer cappuccino espresso and has an excellent selection of coffees and teas for people coming in and out of town. People frequently stop at the café to get their caffeine boost for the two to three hour drive to Duluth, but the café will not sell coffee in a disposable container. If the person has a thermos or mug in the car, the café is more than happy to fill it for them instead.

For the unprepared customer, the café has transportable mugs, purchased at the City Recycling Center, available free of charge. Customers will go outside and drink their coffee and then return to the store with their "recycled" mug after they are through drinking. "We'll say no you can just keep it - pass it on", says Kathy. This is just one example of the thought process and value system that the restaurant is based on. Kathy notes that peoples' reactions to the café's sustainable philosophy are varied.

"At the front counter they have to do a lot of explaining to the customers since they get "both ends of the spectrum". Some are very supportive and think that it is a great idea. Others seem a little bothered and can't understand why they can't just get their cup of coffee and go their way."

She noted that they get some people that are in the middle ground that understands the concept but cannot see how doing this can really make a difference. This is where they further explain the sustainable philosophy of the importance of watching out for future generations. "It is our responsibility to take care of the environment now so that future generations have an environment to enjoy."

Returnable Doggie Bags

This is where owners Barb LaVigne and George Wilkes enter the picture. They have been operating the café for eight to twelve years, and since they are in their thirties, they are considered part of the younger generation. Barb and George have children and care about what they are eating, where it comes from, what we are doing to the earth and environment, and how we preserve it and make it better for the next generation.

How do they deal with customer requests for a leftover container? Kathy explained that "If someone has food they want to take home, we will not use a large Styrofoam container to wrap their leftovers. Instead, we have people sign out plastic containers with a snap lid that they are asked to return the following day."

What about out-of-town travelers? If they are leaving town and cannot return the container they simply let them keep it. Some people think this is a wonderful idea and are really supportive, while others think it is kind of a nuisance, but they like the food all the same. This leads them to be more cooperative, and their food actually arrives in a better, fresher condition since it is separated and sealed.

Kathy concludes: "As much work as it is to do this and explain to people, we want to set an example as well as educate the community, and we want to show people that it can be done. If each little business does their part and puts forth the effort maybe some larger ones will start catching on - or maybe others [people] will start catching on."

Teaching Sustainability

Once again, as with Healey and Kern, I asked Kathy LaVigne about her own perception of sustainability - wondering what advice she would give to promote sustainability in a larger community, such as a big city. Kathy LaVigne,

like Kern, supports education.

She further explains: "It's an education issue - it starts with your sustainable development class at St. John's, for example. When you get married, have kids, and have a home - it will make a difference on how you set up your kitchen or household. So you go a different way than you used to, since you are more aware. And someone has to start the ball rolling and then it will keep on rolling so it is also a leadership issue."

The Angry Trout Café is a good example; large companies like McDonalds or Target could catch wind of the philosophy and realize that it is a good idea. Someone has to decide that the issue is important and take the necessary steps to address the problem and make the solution feasible.

Compostable Trash Bags

There are a lot of people with great ideas that need to be heard. For example, the café uses cornstarch wastebasket linings, which disintegrates much more quickly than a plastic garbage bag would. In fact, they are safe enough that you can let them disintegrate in your mouth. I asked Kathy how strong these bags were and she replied that they do just as well if not better than conventional plastic bags and even have a sort of rubbery characteristic so they actually stretch. Better yet, the cornstarch bags cost about the same as a conventional plastic garbage bag.

I told Kathy I had not heard of such a trash bag and she said that to better educate the public, George Wilkes hung one of the cornstarch bags on the café wall so customers could see innovative technology at work and become more aware of growing environmental concerns. George also provides information on how customers can order the bags for their own personal home use. "So as these new products come out and people see them they write down

the number and are really tuning in...I think that people in my generation are probably more set in their ways when it comes to sustainability issues," comments Kathy regarding public awareness.

"But I know that when we first opened the recycling center before it was real popular they would go through the local school. They even had a project fair where the recycling center would offer incentives for kids to enter and then the kids would go home and get their parents involved in their projects. Through kids is a good way to reach parents - it's all about education and all about awareness."

A Chat with her Honor the Mayor

After finishing my coffee, I headed out to the picnic benches next to the soon-to-be-destroyed gas station and sat down with Andrea Peterson, the then mayor of Grand Marais. Mayor Peterson talked about her electoral battles and how she ran for mayor because she wanted to help Grand Marais become a more beautiful city that respected its natural heritage while building a viable economy. As a former resort owner, she saw that poorly planned growth could hurt the economic base of a resort area. She was determined to ensure that the harbor area was well-protected, that the old ski hill was not to sold to the highest bidder, and that growth was "smart" rather than lured in at any price. She underscored the last comment by pointing out other North Shore communities that have expanded in a more haphazard fashion and now suffer from poor quality development.

In each of her election campaigns, Mayor Peterson has stressed the need to include the environment in any discussions of Grand Marais' future. She proudly pointed to the decisive electoral victories she has enjoyed, noting that more and more people in Grand Marais understand the importance of smart

development that takes the future and the environment into account. This feeling is not as widely shared in the County, as was evidenced by the wish of city representatives not to develop the old ski hill, while the county board members were in favor and will go ahead with their project even if the city does not.

Conclusion

Grand Marais is well on the way to a future that it wants, rather than a future that it gets. It has land trust protection of the harbor area, attempts to protect the old ski hill, the development of a city park replacing the old gas station, recycling of old fish houses and city buildings, and the environmentally conscious Angry Trout Café. Most importantly, it has an engaged group of citizens that seeks to learn more about implementing smart and sustainable development. Grand Marais is developing a resort town from which others would be wise to learn.

For More Information:

- City of Grand Marais, (218) 387-1848 <http://www.boreal.org/cityhall> and (<http://www.grandmaraismn.com>) Todd Bodem, past City Clerk Andrea Peterson, past Mayor
- North House Folk School, www.northhouse.org Mark Hansen, Director
- Jeff Kern, jeffkern@boreal.org
- Angry Trout Café, Highway 61 in Grand Marais, 218-387-1265, <http://www.northshorevisitor.com/dining/grand-marais.html>
- For more info see http://www.moea.state.mn.us/res/V8_4/sleddogs.cfm