

Sustainability is a Journey not a Destination

An Affirmative View – Mark Farnsworth

Like you I have listened with keen interest to the opening remarks. There is no doubt in my mind that “sustainability is a journey not a destination”.

I have had clear instruction: it is the role of the second speaker to bring some serious comment to support the light hearted comments and observations of our team leader, Jan.

Can I remind you of Robert Louis Stevenson’s famous quote as it very simply encapsulates the theme I intend to develop:

“To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive.”

That is totally true of our approach to the sustainability journey.

In a pure ecological sense the whole notion of sustainability is an oxymoron – history clearly demonstrates that all species track the same route – birth, youth, maturity, old age, extinction. The stark reality of our current situation is that we have come to realise that we need to do something about the mess we have been making of our planet in order to prolong our time on it – so we have purchased this vehicle sustainability.

If we review the journey so far we can see that the whole concept of sustainability is: a gospel to some; vacuous to others; and multi-faceted to the rest. The Resource Management Act in 1991 introduced a legislative notion of “sustainable management”. Sixteen years down the track this notion is seen as ambiguous and open to a wide range of interpretations, many of which are contradictory.

The Local Government Act 2002 tasked us with sustainable development and tied it to the four well-beings – cultural, economic, environmental and social. This has helped to add to the confusion as sustainable management, sustainable development, sustainable growth, sustainable communities and sustainable use, etc, have tendered to be used interchangeably as if the meanings were similar – they are not. We now have household sustainability.

Perhaps one of the first milestones of our journey should be the adoption and agreement on a single definition of sustainable development – the Brundtland one?

The sustainability journey has moved from the back roads to the main highway – mainstream - it is on our nation’s road map and it is in the public eye.

An inconvenient truth and the Stern report have all helped to reinforce that move.

Helen Clark has made it clear that sustainability will be a core value and wants it to be central to New Zealand’s unique national identity. National have even embraced the concept.

Those of us in regional councils/unitary councils are now grappling with some sections of our communities who do not want to join the sustainable journey as they do not agree that being sustainable includes our involvement in social, cultural and

economic outcomes. They have great difficulty in balancing these new responsibilities against what they perceive as a core environmental function. I have long held the view that our environmental stewardship role is largely predicated on a robust and dynamic regional economy, aligning ourselves to being overly “eco-friendly” and “green” can sometimes derail us from the true direction of sustainability.

With tongue planted only slightly in cheek, it's fair to say that our sustainable journey so far has been a bit of a Sunday drive, relatively quiet, changing vehicles, meandering, back tracing, getting lost and it has been peaceful. That drive is well and truly over and we are on the motorway. There is a lot of noise, bad drivers, new vehicles, less time. We now have new road signs such as “carbon neutral”, “carbon credits” and “emission off sets”.

A new global industry has started to make businesses more environmentally friendly. These are potentially new bumps in the road – buying carbon credits online from some developing nation may be about as useful as buying a quarter acre on the moon. But reality says that we may have to purchase credits while we get our emissions under control.

We are not really sure about our sustainable heading or where we may end up. We do not know the distinction, or perhaps want to know it. Rather we are on a journey of discovery and I predict the parameters and beliefs of sustainability will be completely different in five years? Ten years? Enjoy the ride on the holistic highway of sustainability as the American author Greg Anderson said:

“Focus on the journey not the destination. Joy is found not in finishing an activity but in doing it.”