

Taking in the big picture

Workshop offers plenty to think about

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GREENFIELD — Greening Greenfield is looking for more input as it continues to craft a vision of the town in 2050.

“Increased civic involvement is as important as the environment,” said Professor Ben Weil.

Weil teaches courses in energy-efficient buildings at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and was a guest speaker at a Greening Greenfield workshop Saturday. His words were echoed by many in the crowd at Greenfield Community College.

“I’d be happy to hear more people participating and bringing these issues to the council,” said Town Councillor David Singer, after hearing ideas from others in a post-presentation discussion on buildings and energy use. Singer encouraged attendees to get in touch with their local planning boards and other elected officials, to bring about the change they’d like to see.

Ideas in the sub-group included promoting higher-density residences in the downtown area to preserve open space, finding ways to finance and install photo-voltaic arrays on rooftops across town, and providing incentives for homeowners, landlords, and tenants to retrofit their homes with energy-efficient heat systems.

They also talked about marketing Greening Greenfield’s mission to those who aren’t yet involved. Often, they agreed, the organization’s events are filled with familiar faces and they want to expand their reach.

One hard-to-reach population, they said, are those who don’t believe in climate change or are more concerned with their bank accounts than the environment. They decided they’d have to appeal to their interests, and show them how renewable energy and sustainable practices are not only good for the planet, but their wallets as well, though it may not be the quickest return on an investment.

Saturday’s crowd also felt that they should try to bring in others who aren’t involved in the community, and draw on their knowledge.

A sub-group that discussed health care said the elderly have a wealth of knowledge about the health care system through their personal experience. Younger people, they said, are generally in better health, and don’t have as much experience with the system.

Donna Stern, a Baystate Franklin Medical Center nurse, spoke about the current state of health care, and how it could improve.

“Health care is a commodity, no different from new or used cars,” she said.

These days, said Stern, she spends less time than ever with patients, as nursing jobs have been cut back to save money.

“It’s because it’s about providing cost-efficient care,” she said. To do that, “they’ve been getting rid of nurses, dismantling private practices, and making it harder (for doctors) to become primary care physicians.”

Private health insurance companies and their mission to make money isn’t helping to provide quality care either, she said.

The U.S. has the highest health care costs in the world, “and we’re 37th in results,” said Stern.

Stern envisions a day when hospitals return their focus to health care, rather than making money.

Another group talked about education, and the need for it to change with the times.

“The 20th-century concept of education is out-dated,” said Joshua Hornick, who teaches at Four Rivers Charter Public School, and was a founding member of North Star Self-Directed Learning for Teens, an alternative school in Hadley.

Education in the last century was geared toward preparing students for a different world, where factory jobs were abundant and people were taught skills relevant to those vocations, said Hornick. He stressed the need for more individualized education, and teaching broad concepts, rather than specific skills, to get students thinking for themselves.

The fourth group talked about sustainable food systems. Western Massachusetts has the local producers, but needs the infrastructure to get local foods to the masses, said Evelyn Lane, speaking for the group.

“There’s a need for a mid-sized aggregator of food from local farms to grocery stores,” said Lane. “Big Y can’t be in touch with each individual farm.”

Abrah Dresdale, farm and foods coordinator at GCC, gave a presentation on sustainable food practices, reading from a narrative she imagined sending herself from the year 2050.

By then, she said, “local” and “sustainable” labels will have disappeared from foods, because all the food will be local and sustainable, removing the need for differentiation. There would be a dedicated space for a daily farmers’ market, and goods would be transported up and down rivers and on electric trains.

Fruit and nut trees planted in medians and along streets would be in full bloom, providing free food for those who can reach it. And residents would receive tax breaks for turning their high-maintenance lawns into food-producing victory gardens.

Though the forum focused on the future, some looked to the past for inspiration.

“We learned to grow our own food and raise our own meat, and how to hunt and fish,” said Dresdale, reading her “letter from 2050.”

“We wisened up. We learned, and we studied the ways of our ancestors, and the indigenous people who lived on the land before us.”

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