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## **‘Natural Step’ groups plan next steps**

By Kate Bergeron

Some Osceola residents want to find an opportunity in the fuel-price crisis to move the community toward sustainability.

Members of five area “The Natural Step for Communities” study circles came together Wednesday with Kelly Cain, director of the St. Croix Institute for Sustainable Community Development at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls, to brainstorm the decisions and actions that should take place.

This spring, “The Natural Step” study circles read the book and discussed the process of changing a community to sustainable practices. Now they must figure out the nuts and bolts of the plan.

The Osceola and St. Croix Falls communities represent what Cain said he hopes will happen in River Falls.

“Osceola and St. Croix Falls are clearly way ahead of conceptualizing this and taking it where it needs to go,” he said.

Before having the group split into smaller teams to brainstorm ideas on four topics related to sustainability, Cain discussed the urgency of the matter.

He cited the latest research that claims the Arctic Ocean is likely to be ice-free by 2012 before focusing on the energy crisis. Local fuel prices have increased more than \$1.25 per gallon since “The Natural Step” process started in November.

“Energy is clearly the underpinning of everything,” he said.

Currently the United States depends on foreign sources for 62-65 percent of its oil, he said. Wisconsin is spending about \$19.5 billion for fuel each year.

“This is not about a choice of choosing sustainability,” he said. “It is about avoiding unsustainability. The opportunity exists for us to rise to an entirely new level.”

Cain also said that solving the current and future problems will involve traditional American values: ingenuity, self-sufficiency, self-determination and responsibility.

Cain identified six areas where sustainable practices could have the most affect locally: energy, housing and building, transportation, food, tourism and

waste. With 20 people in attendance, the group decided to split into four groups and focus on the first four items to brainstorm actions steps.

The goals for each area, as presented in “The Natural Step,” are to:

- Reduce dependency on fossil fuels.
- Reduce dependency on man-made chemicals.
- Reduce encroachment on natural resources.
- Meet the needs of community members fairly and efficiently.

The team that focused on energy focused closely on the education process and how to educate and interest children in new technologies.

“They have to buy into it,” said Bob Schmidt, who is the director of building and grounds for the Osceola Public Schools.

The team also discussed sharing the experience and payback the school district will realize with its solar panels and other alternative energy sources.

The housing and building team provided a wide variety of options for prompting changes and educating consumers as well as building contractors about natural materials.

They suggested looking at incentives for both energy conservation and generation; using open houses, demonstrations or tours to educate consumers; researching what building materials could be made locally; recycling excess building materials; natural chemical alternatives; and zoning.

The team also discussed promoting population density for land conservation and the sharing of some energy systems.

“My personal belief is so much of it is education of what’s already out there,” said Osceola Village Administrator Neil Soltis.

The transportation team brainstormed a list of action items, then prioritized three items they thought might be the easiest to do.

They suggested facilitating carpooling or ridesharing for commuters could be one of the easier accomplishments. The Sun has already started a carpooling blog on its Web site to help commuters find rides, and the transportation team suggested helping market the Web site around the community, especially to workers in the industrial park.

The team also said creating bike or walking paths through the community, particularly the townships, is a priority. They suggested there was a need to find

out the feasibility of trails and meet with town officials.

The transportation team also conceptualized a transportation service that could transport travelers from the St. Croix Falls and Osceola areas to downtown St. Paul and Minneapolis, the Minneapolis/St. Paul airport and perhaps the Mall of America. Instead of having “The Natural Step” start such a service, they wanted to research the business opportunity and locate a potential business owner.

The team that focused on food suggesting defining the local community better and then doing a food audit, said Dan Guenther, who owns a community-supported agriculture farm in Farmington Township.

“We suggest looking at the food flow in and out of the region ... and create an inventory of land available for food production,” he said.

Guenther also discussed the need for collaboration among food growers both to create larger inventories of some crops, such as carrots or potatoes, for institutions such as local schools or hospitals to use, and to reduce financial risk to farmers if a crop fails.

“We’ll need to work with larger scale commercial farmers to spread risk,” he said.

Guenther said the team imagined a more diverse agricultural landscape with more sod, animals and different vegetables, such as cabbage or potatoes.

Brainstorming and discussing ideas kept the meeting lively for more than an hour after its scheduled adjourn time without any definitive action steps assigned.

Cain said it is essential for “The Natural Step” participants to decide who will do what or the energy behind the project will languish, so another meeting will soon be scheduled to decide on tasks, responsibilities and times.

“It’s a matter of picking the low-hanging fruit, the best investment,” Cain said. “You’re looking for as much synergy between ideas as you can find.”

“It would be good to find out what people thought of the ideas that were put out there,” George Smith said.