

THE SUSTAINABILITY CON

P.T. Barnum once said “*there’s a sucker born every minute*”. And in some areas of community development and planning, this old quote has resurfaced once again in spades, when it comes time to exploiting the word “*sustainable*”. By definition, sustainable means “able to be sustained for an indefinite period without damaging the environment, or without depleting a resource; renewable!”

But how is this “sustainability con” exactly happening, one might ask? Well, it is a bit of a play on the old “snake-oil” salesman bit. You know the one where the crowd is at the county fair being entertained by some smooth talking chap, selling a whole host of cures and elixirs that can heal anything and everything. And with a few optimistic and enthusiastic well placed skills in the crowd, well, then the feeding frenzy starts.

This “*sounds too good to be true*” scheme has been around for ages, used in some form or another. We as humans are just primed for being taken advantage of. It takes no more then watching those late night infomercials to realize how really vulnerable and maybe even gullible we are. Miracle cures and work saving devices are the backbone of this scheme.

But what if this type of snake-oil scheme were exploited and used to sell more then gadgets and cures? The recent financial mortgage disaster is a perfect example. A few slick snake-oil style salesmen had many convinced their “*too-good-to-be-true*” scheme was different. But sadly, in the end it was just another pyramid scheme, selling the illusion.

Well, how does the word “*sustainable*” fit in as a “too good to be true” snake-oil scheme? Well, the word “Sustainable” has been adopted by a whole host of players who are trying to sell us, the public, something with respect to “helping the environment”. Sustainability is the new buzzword that many have highjacked to sell to the citizens of many communities on earth, something that isn’t really there. It is now about the “end justifies the means” and seems to be taken right out of the “snake-oil” sales book!

It is obvious to many who use common sense, that being more sustainable is actually quite easy and makes a lot of sense. For example; wasting is seen in an entirely different light and communities that embrace a commitment to being more sustainable following sustainable waste and recycling practices, reap huge dividends and rewards. There is a place for common scensical thinking, rewarding good behavior and opens up opportunities for innovators and forward thinkers.

First of all, actually being more sustainable with our discarded materials and recyclables offers us reuse opportunities while using materials that we discard being repurposed. True sustainability is very circular and creates a wealth of employment opportunities and environmental benefits and works from the bottom up, by including all the stakeholders.

But, on the other hand, there are those well entrenched in positions of power that see sustainability in an entirely different light. The goal is to not actually be more sustainable but to trade on the illusion of “trying to be more sustainable” which is always down the road and is a “process”. The process then becomes one that requires many expensive consultants, surveys, public reviews and on and on it goes. The expenses never end. We never get there. It’s always a journey!

And this version of sustainability works only from the top down, with hand picked stakeholders who operate from the same script and is linear. There are few opportunities to move laterally. This type of sustainability design is to make stuff just go away cheaply and quickly, much like those late night infomercials selling cure alls, convenience and work saving devices.

The key for this top down scheme to work is to identify the weaknesses in the victims or consumer. In this case it is exploiting and tapping into public apathy. Often, people want to put minimal effort into recycling or contributing to helping make their community more sustainable. For this is the key for the how the “sustainability con” actually works. Also, having unhindered access to the media is critical for the “sustainability con” to work really well.

Secondly, another key to all of this if the “sustainability con” is to work is there must be experts. And the more expensive and the flashier the better. Many Elected officials love these folks. And they come in as part of the “sustainability con” as consultants. So, with the “experts” well in place and combined with unrestricted access to the media, the messaging about selling the illusion of sustainability is the foundation for the “sustainability con” to flourish. The messaging is never questioned or challenged.

It is like we are operating in a Parallel Universe where common sense and reality does not exist. Selling the “sizzle....not the steak” is becoming the norm and folks so busy just trying to make it from pay cheque to pay cheque buy into the scheme dictated to us from those whom we rely on and trust.

So, like in any good “Parallel Universe” Star Trek episode for example, we must suspend belief. Up is down, black is white. Who are the good guys, who are the bad guys? Who do we trust? And with respect to being sustainable, it is now more about selling “snake-oil”, not being more

sustainable. A classic slight of hand illusion where we get sucked into the story line, whether we want to or not and everything kind of makes sense, even though it is all backwards.

And with the “sustainability con, we must trust that the consultant has “our” best interests at heart. After all, they are called Environmental Consultants, aren’t they? And we must trust that the government staffers that hire these folks have our best interest at heart as well. But what if they don’t?

What if we are part of an elaborate scheme that is not about being more sustainable but in fact we are victims of a “too-good-to-be-true” scheme? Could this actually be true? Has sustainability turned into nothing more than a marketing scheme, funded by the taxpayers for the benefit of a few??

Could it be that certain well entrenched players, certain non profits, certain waste industry big wigs, certain hand picked waste consultants, certain policy makers at the government level all pushing a certain agenda driven by municipal, regional or county staff that requires a massive bureaucracy to administer? So along with control of their message through the media, it is how the “Sustainability Con” is being sold to us? One can quickly see that some things just don’t ad up? At least if being more sustainable is the actual goal.

With the recent financial melt down, many put their heads in the sand and the financial meltdown unraveled to a point where many investors were decimated and wiped out. And many who were responsible for that were rewarded and in some cases received promotions, raises and big bonuses. Is the “sustainability con” more of this same type of shenanigans? Star Trek Parallel Universe episode anyone?

Well the stage is now set for the Sustainability Con. The rails have been greased, the shills are in place, the deck of cards well marked so the deck is stacked and we now have a whole new industry selling the newest “Sustainability snake-oil called, sustainable Waste To Energy for example, to generate some power.

The sustainable-snake-oil-salesmen are green washing and rebranding what “sustainable” means, even to the point where they are calling their schemes “Sustainable Zero Waste”. It’s greenwashing on steroids.

This scorched earth scheme will just make all waste go away by burning it. The power generated is the illusion sold as something wonderful and the buzzwords are thrown around like crazy by the key players selling this scam. And how is this sustainable? It requires massive amounts of

taxpayer's money to just study, review and research being sustainable. And it will be "down the road" when this Waste To Energy sustainability scheme finds its way along side the dinosaur. But too late, the damage is done, the scheme operator's jobs are secure and the cash keeps flowing at taxpayer's expense until the scheme is hatched or moth-balled. Then some other scheme will pop up to sell that version of modern day snake oil. And of course, that too will be "sustainable"!

But the entire process is about supporting a hierarchy that needs waste. Lots of it! Wasting is a management job creator for those who can't or don't want change. The good old boys club operates around this principal. So, instead of actually doing something that supports being more sustainable, this small group of hand picked stakeholders has hooked up with public relations firms selling the illusion.

Just like "Clean Coal", everything is now tarred by the "Sustainability" brush by this group. The key now is in order to keep selling this illusory sustainability scam, those who can make a difference, the innovators, the forward thinkers; those with common sense must be excluded. They must be kept out. And the illusory sustainability pyramid then gets ramped up to use terms like "miracle cure" or "work saving opportunity". Anyone who disagrees is categorized as a "trouble maker" and frozen out

The Sustainability Con is now all about transporting waste and recyclables over massive distances. It is about creating policies and rules on who can and can't handle solid waste, a great exclusion technique. It's about burning waste and mixing everything in one bin and then sell it as sustainable, as our resources continue to be rapidly depleted.

The decision makers and policy folks take in all these fancy reports, littered with pie charts, graphs and statistics and regurgitate them out to the public in a dumbed down "one size fits all" formula that is not about being more sustainable but actually about maintaining the status quo. It's the "clean coal" thing all over again. Why put work and effort into doing better? The entrenched stakeholders have hatched a scheme where nothing really has to change or fear risk losing their employment or meal ticket, and the illusion of being more sustainable is what is sold, not actually being more sustainable.

So, if we are ever to become a more sustainable society, maybe we have to start questioning if "something is actually too good to be true"? Solid waste managers have morphed into "Sustainability Coordinators. Every local government now has a new stack of taxpayer's money to draw from to expand the amount of government staff needed to run their "Sustainability Departments". We have sustainability technicians. We have sustainability outreach coordinators. We have sustainability managers and on and on it

goes. All paid for by the taxpayer. But little trickles down to support more sustainable community waste and recycling programs.

Burning garbage was turned into Waste To Energy and soon will be called “Renewable Energy. All unsustainable but the brand is changed, not the unsustainable behavior.

The entire “top down government run Sustainability Plan really is about perpetuating waste, making waste go away, cheap commingled curbside pick up to support this scheme and then to sell it all as something that is....Sustainable, even though it is not!

Community solid waste and recycling programs that want to become more sustainable, need to look at supporting and researching existing innovators and those who practice acting outside the box. By including all the stakeholders means that there will be opportunities to promote these new ideas.

This Earth Day, maybe what we might want to look at something we all can do? Maybe we can just get better informed? Maybe ask questions? Maybe we don't buy into community recycling programs that supports down-cycling?

After all, in the world of Sustainable Community Design, the joke is circulating around about “how many entrenched sustainability employees and those with a vested interest and how much of our tax dollars does it take to make a sustainable community”? Fill in the punch line!

Maybe we must rethink, reexamine and realize what our role is in all of this as individuals? And we as individuals create the solutions and our actions will determine the outcome. We must support sustainability programs that does not follow a path to export our problems onto others or just make stuff go away cheaply. We can not allow “Sustainable Community Design” to be turned into a marketing scheme selling us the illusion or “snake-oil”.

We are either part of the solution or part of the problem! And there is no quick fix. There is no magic pill; there is no band aide to cover up the damage that we have done to our planet. To be a more sustainable society, we all have to pull our weight. We all have to look in the mirror! We all have to be accountable!

Buddy Boyd

www.gibsonsrecycling.ca