

Focusing the Lens of Sustainability
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Written for *The Golden Informer*, 2007

Have you ever been in a meeting or a conversation where someone uses a word, and as the dialogue continues, you realize that your definition or understanding of that word is different from theirs? Sometimes when this happens, it can be hysterical, and sometimes it can be devastating. Regardless of the impact, it is always eye opening, and can change the focus of what needs to be said.

On Feb. 28, a group of Golden citizens, City Council and City staff gathered to discuss a topic that often leaves whole crowds grasping for their own definition: sustainability. As Golden moves forward in its exploration of sustainability, it is important that we all have a basic definition of this word. Sharing the same basic definition ensures we all start at the same place of understanding.

The word “sustainability” first came into use (for topics other than finances) through the 1987 United Nation’s Brundtland Commission report, “Our Common Future.” The report supplied this definition for the term sustainable development: “Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Since that time, this definition has been used to describe an entire sustainability movement, paraphrased as such: “Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the needs of the future.”

While this definition has very solid, well-documented roots, most people are unaware of it. In fact, when discussing sustainability, many people immediately think about the environment: solar power, carbon emissions, environmental stewardship, and one or all of the “three R’s” (reduce, reuse, recycle). Still others use this word to discuss finances, or building a structure that will last 100 years. All of these things are related to sustainability, yet none of them are the single definition of it.

This is because sustainability itself is not a single goal. It’s not a pre-determined set of actions to be taken, and it’s not an end point. Sustainability is a lens through which we see our businesses, our lives, our buildings — the world around us. It’s a way of

thinking that shapes all decisions for every kind of bottom line you can think of: profit, people or planet.

Often times, acting in a sustainable way is the most simple, straightforward action. Choosing a step while wearing the sustainability lens directs you to the place of least impact for the planet and people, which has a direct correlation to the impact on your wallet. Because of its inherent simplicity, sustainability truly can reduce costs and increase quality of life.

Recently the international furniture store Ikea announced it would start charging shoppers for plastic bags. Money raised will be donated, and plastic bag use is expected to decrease as much as 90% by 2008. With fewer plastic bags to purchase, Ikea does well financially and does environmental good.

That said, sustainability is dynamic by nature. This means that every situation presents its own challenges, some are more complex than others, thus the sustainable choice for each situation is different. For example, having to remodel an existing infrastructure can be vastly more complex than creating a new one . . . but not always.

As Golden moves forward with sustainability in mind, it is critical that every citizen, every Council member, every staff person, begins to wear the lens of sustainability. Test it out with something small, like a new purchase you need to make, or the plan for your spring landscape. Think about giving equal weight to the people involved (from creating the product to the end user), the overall impact on the environment, and the complete cost (think about where it came from, if it will save money on your bills, longevity, disposal, etc.). Keep that lens with you always, and slowly we will start to see Golden in a new light.