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Community Organizations Can Lead the Way to Sustainability

Community organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are an important component of our society in that they rise to fill spaces left vacant by government and corporate interests. However, contrary to the vocal special-interest NGOs in pursuit of political leverage, community organizations are often overlooked as they quietly provide programs, activities, services, and support which benefit and improve the lives of citizens. Although there are many community organizations in Fredericton that make positive contributions to our city on a daily basis, I would like to focus on one community organization in particular, the YMCA of Fredericton, which is about to initiate a major growth strategy.

The YMCA of Fredericton has acquired the former Albert Street Middle School property and is now planning the construction of a new multi-purpose facility, given that it has outgrown its current home on Saunders Street. If we believe that the YMCA makes a difference in the lives of the 11,000 people who participate in its programs each year, and that these same people can then make a difference in others' lives as well, then we can clearly see that the YMCA has a very significant positive impact in our community.

The YMCA's impact on peoples' lives is most directly influenced by the manner in which people interact with the organization and with each other, but it is also indirectly influenced by the manner in which they interact with the 'built' environment. So the opportunity to build a new facility from the ground up is an opportunity to influence such interaction for many years to come. As such, I challenge the YMCA to be one of the first organizations in Fredericton to include issues of environmental sustainability in its planned development, not as a special-interest committee, but rather as an integral component weighted equally with social, cultural, and economic sustainability.

Integrating environmental sustainability in the planning process goes beyond a call to simply install the current best-practice environmental technologies, but rather extends to employing multi-dimensional decision making at all stages of the process. Of course, at minimum this includes creation of an energy efficient structure and low-energy technical operations. But also encompasses everything from low impact site development and natural landscaping, to structuring the building and surroundings to encourage walk and bike traffic and minimize vehicle-related congestion. Essentially, sustainability considerations include everything required to ensure a low organizational environmental footprint for many years to come.

Decisions should be made with regard to maximizing social and cultural returns, while minimizing the environmental impact and the economic bottom-line over a multi-decade timeline. The price tag for the new facility will likely reflect the cost of construction, but will not account for any future returns to society or long-term operating costs. That is why such decisions, that have broad and long-term

consequences, need to be made within a holistic framework that ensures balance between the three key sustainability components: social/cultural advancement; economic stability, and environmental protection.

The new YMCA facility has the potential to not only revolutionize our perceptions of what a community center is and does and how it looks, but also revolutionize our perceptions of how the built environment can interact with the natural environment. The new facility is an opportunity for the YMCA to demonstrate to Fredericton its vision of community service to current and future beneficiaries. But at the same time the new facility is an exceptional opportunity for the community to rally around the YMCA and be part of this process, to express its vision of a healthy and sustainable community for current and future residents.

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