

Sustaining the conversation

By Sara Loftson Cochrane Times May 27, 2009

For three days the Cochrane RancheHouse was host to the first Pathways to Sustainability Conference.

Now in its 20th year, the Cochrane Environmental Action Committee sponsored the conference, bringing politicians such as Reform Party founder Preston Manning, municipal staff and the public together to talk about the economic, environmental, social and governance aspects of sustainability.

"We wanted to share and cross-fertilize ideas," said Tim Giese, CEAC president and conference co-organizer. "We hope what comes out of this is networking. We hope this conference is a model and will be used again."

The conference is timely as council just passed its Cochrane Sustainability Plan, a document that will guide the future of Cochrane's own sustainable development for years to come.

The organizing committee had hoped for upwards of 120-140 delegates only about 83 people registered.

"We definitely were hoping for greater participation," said committee member Valerie McCracken, explaining they were targeting municipal staff, but given the economics she doesn't think municipalities had the money to send people.

"They are being very cautious of how they are spending their money, I think they were developing a wait and see to see how it goes this year."

McCracken said the group hopes to learn from this year's conference for next year even though Cochrane probably won't be hosting it.

Representatives from Airdrie, Canmore, Olds and Strathcona, as well as, Cochrane's Mayor Truper McBride presented on a different aspect of sustainability.

Airdrie Mayor Linda Bruce presented at the conference about social sustainability.

"A lot of times people think sustainability just means 'environment' and if that's all they see, they say you can't choose the environment over everything and they are right, you can't," said Bruce. It's all about managing the tradeoffs between all the pillars of sustainability and ensuring it can meet the needs of people today and tomorrow."

She said while the definition of sustainability can get fuzzy there is only one definition — whether something is viable or not.

"People do want sustainability, they just have to understand what that means to them and what they want is a vibrant community, a clean community, a safe community and to know that financially the community is rolling along well."

Beside Preston Manning, the two other keynote speakers were Don Hill, who spoke about made-in-Alberta technology, and Mark Anielski who spoke about his book *The Economics of Happiness: Building Genuine Wealth*.

"It's time for us to develop an economy based on well-being and happiness," said Anielski. "If we're going to get to sustainability we have to address the inherent shorting comings of economic of growth."

He promotes stewardship, moderation and living in harmony with the land and each other.

"This province, like most provinces, is addicted to growth and we don't seem to know how to stop. And the economy I see is more like a cancer than a forest," said Anielski.

Measuring what matters creates awareness about what do people value, not just in monetary terms.

"If we take a stewardship perspective, the first thing we are conscious of is when we produce a barrel of oil, what kind of ecological deficit do we generate, and if we are wise accountants, we actually put those on the books."

At a community level, Anielski said, it begins with being conscious of how you spend you money. When you buy a cup of coffee, did you buy it from the café selling fair trade coffee?

"Those decisions can be made at the governance level, the mayor and council can also make those decisions on a regular basis are we acting and thinking locally," he said.

