

CET sees leadership change

Environmental organization has come full circle during co-directors' lengthy tenure

BY JOHN TOWNES

As lead staff members at the Center for Ecological Technology (CET) for over three decades, co-directors Alan Silverstein and Laura Dubester have long been actively engaged in the movement to foster an environmentally sustainable society. They have also witnessed firsthand the ups and downs in the contemporary evolution of that larger movement from its early days in the 1970s to today's widespread focus on green living.

"In a way, we've seen things come full circle," said Silverstein. "In the 1970s there was a high level of public interest in the environment, and there was government support for solar power, energy conservation and other sustainable alternatives. Eventually that declined, but in recent years we're seen a resurgence, with a high level of interest and activity that is similar to the 1970s."

This time, he believes, there is also an important fundamental difference, because it is more widespread and is likely to permanently take hold for a combination of reasons.

"Today, it's easier for people to connect the dots and see the larger consequences of our actions," Silverstein said. "There's also more of a recognition that the quality of the environment is not just one issue, but is directly related to everything else, including the economy, public health, national security and our basic quality of life."

CET is an independent nonprofit organization that was founded in 1976. According to CET's mission statement, the organization's purpose is "to research, develop, demonstrate and promote those technologies which have the least disruptive impact on the natural ecology of the Earth."

Dubester is a co-founder who joined the staff of CET in early 1977. Silverstein began working there in 1978.

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Laura Dubester and Alan Silverstein are transitioning out of their leadership positions with CET, where they have long been actively engaged in the movement to foster an environmentally sustainable society.

In July, Silverstein and Dubester, who are married, announced that they are retiring as co-directors of CET.

John Majercak, an associate director of CET who has been with the organization since 1992, will succeed them as the organization's new executive director. Silverstein and Dubester will continue to work at CET during the transition this summer and fall, and will remain on the organization's board of directors. Nancy Nylen, who has over 30 years of employment with CET, will continue to serve as associate director.

"We simply decided it was time to retire," said Silverstein. "Both of us have been doing this for more than 30 years, and that's long enough. We also are confident about leaving now, because the organization is in a good position, and it has an excellent staff and board that are very well qualified to handle the opportunities and challenges ahead."

Silverstein and Dubester, who live in Stockbridge, said that they plan to do some

relaxing and pursue other personal activities, including travel and spending time with their parents.

However, they emphasized that they will continue to be involved with CET, and will also pursue other projects related to sustainability. Among other activities, they are members of the Stockbridge Green Team, a committee which is working to develop sustainable practices in that town and meet the criteria of the Massachusetts Green Communities Initiative.

Practical and pragmatic

Today, CET works throughout western Massachusetts with a staff of some 90 people. It is based in building it owns at 112 Elm St. in Pittsfield. CET also has an office on West Housatonic Street in that city, and another office in Florence (near Northampton). It also operates the ReStore Home Improvement Center in Springfield, which sells used building and home supplies and equipment. Majercak developed and manages that operation.

During their tenure, Silverstein and

Dubester steered CET's growth from its modest origins to its current role as a regional organization that combines advocacy with practical support and expertise to translate the goals of the environmental movement into tangible, mainstream solutions for energy, waste management and other activities.

"There has always been a technical core to what CET does," said Silverstein. "In a broad sense, our focus is to respond to community needs in practical ways that have less of an adverse impact on the environment."

Dubester added that CET has always emphasized pragmatic strategies that can be implemented as mainstream practices on a day-to-day level.

"At CET, we want to demonstrate what can be done, rather than just talk about it," said Dubester. "Our basic message is that people can continue to have the lifestyle they are accustomed to, but they can do it in ways that require less energy and which are more sustainable for the environment."

Dubester added that, while most people are supportive of the goals of sustainability, the level of commitment does vary.

"People want to do the right thing for the environment, but some people are more committed to doing it than others," she said. "For example, some people are dedicated to recycling, and they will make whatever effort is necessary to do that. Others are willing to recycle if it's convenient. So the most effective way to increase the amount of waste that is recycled is to make it as easy to do as possible."

CET's activities include developing access to sustainable technologies and practices for residents, businesses, organizations and farms. It devises and implements programs related to solar and other renewable energy sources and energy conservation systems; sustainable waste management methods such as reuse, recycling, composting and toxics-use reduction; and environmental education initiatives, among other activities.

It pursues these goals through various strategies and working partnerships with businesses, other organizations and government. Its specific activities include energy audits of homes and other sites, and assistance with the process and costs of making structures more energy efficient. It also helps municipalities implement waste disposal and management programs, and is involved in many other projects.

"As a nonprofit organization, CET's focus is on innovation," said Silverstein. "Our role is to constantly look ahead for the next wave of solutions. When we see an idea that has potential, we introduce it and make an effort to adopt it. If it's a good idea that works and is accepted by the public, we move on to the next thing."

This process often starts with questions. "We look at barriers and seek solutions," said Silverstein. "For example, we might look at composting. We'll ask: 'Why don't more people compost?' Then we look for a solution that will encourage that."



Reflecting on their more than three decades of work at CET, Laura Dubester and Alan Silverstein say the level of public interest in the goals of environmentalism and sustainable living has ebbed and flowed over the years. However, they believe that awareness of today's heightened environmental stakes is taking hold on a level that will eventually lead to more permanent support for sustainable policies and practices.

Dubester noted that some initiatives also start out as trials of new approaches and technologies.

As an example, she cited one of CET's early projects, a passive solar greenhouse that it constructed at the Berkshire Botanical Garden in Stockbridge in the late 1970s. This combined the traditional elements of a greenhouse with other materials and features that capture and store energy during the daylight hours, to reduce the need to use different sources of energy at other times. The experiment proved successful, and the botanical garden eventually built other greenhouses using that technology.

"That started when we said 'Let's see if a solar greenhouse will work in western Massachusetts,'" Dubester said.

CET's pragmatic approach also extends to its own administration and finances. It supplements grants and other funding with earned income from spin-offs of its core activities, such as passive solar installations, workshops and other activities.

"We're a very entrepreneurial organization," said Dubester. "We look at areas where the market is not working, and which we can do something about while also earning income for the organization. The revenue from these enterprises is one reason we've survived through some difficult periods when other organizations like this had to close."

Full circle

Looking at the larger trends in recent years, Dubester and Silverstein observed that the level of public interest and support for the

goals of environmentalism and sustainable living have ebbed and flowed over the past several decades.

"Interest in this was very high in the 1970s, in the wake of the oil crisis and other events," said Dubester. "There was also strong national leadership for it under the Carter administration, and there were many programs and incentives to encourage these initiatives. As a result, the infrastructure for them grew incredi-

bly, and a competitive market among dealers began to emerge."

But then, she continued, in the 1980s the nation's leadership and

political climate changed with the Reagan era, and much of the funding and other support disappeared.

"After 1980, there was a different national agenda," said Dubester. "When the government support was gone, much of the previous momentum collapsed, and it largely went dormant nationally. Many of these organizations and initiatives did not survive in the 1980s. But the grassroots supporters did persist, and the technology did advance during that time."

The level of government support and public interest increased again during the 1990s.

Then, after the 2000 election, there was another decline in government support. Nevertheless, public interest continued to increase. The increased demand has also stimulated the market for sustainable technologies.

In recent years, government policies to encourage sustainable practices have once again increased through a mix of incentives (such as tax credits, grants and subsidies) combined with regulations and mandates.

"At CET, we want to demonstrate what can be done, rather than just talk about it."

Dubester and Silverstein attributed this resurgence to a combination of conditions.

"There are many parallels between the situation in the 1970s and today," said Dubester. "Back then, the oil crisis had sparked awareness of the problems associated with fossil fuels. We were also experiencing a serious recession, and there was growing concern about the environment."

Today, America and the rest of the world are again grappling with contemporary versions of similar problems, which has also refocused attention on the principles of sustainability.

One frustration for advocates of sustain-

able technologies is the contrast between the recognition of the need for changes in the 1970s, and the subsequent lack of fundamental progress.

However, Dubester and Silverstein believe this time it is taking hold in ways that are likely to be permanent and widespread.

The improved efficiency and effectiveness of solar energy systems, wind power and other sustainable technologies have made them more effective, practical and affordable – especially as the cost of gas and other traditional energy sources has gone up.

The conversion to a greener economy is also seen more widely as an economic stimulus,

"Today, there is much greater awareness of the environmental consequences of our actions, both as a society and as individuals."

Veteran CET staffer assumes leadership position

When he formally takes over as executive director of the Center for Ecological Technology (CET) this autumn, John Majercak will be new to the job. But he is a veteran employee of the organization, where he has worked since 1991.

Majercak is a native of Ohio who joined CET shortly after moving to Lanesboro in the early 1990s. He currently lives in Conway (near Deerfield) and is an associate director of CET. He is also manager of ReStore Home Improvement Center, a store in Springfield that CET operates, which collects and re-sells building and home supplies.

He has worked in a wide variety of positions at CET on most of the issues the organization is involved with, from ground-level fieldwork to program development and public education to management. He also started the ReStore Home Furnishings Center.

"I've had many different jobs here over the years," Majercak said. "Then when I moved into management, I also began working with administrative responsibilities like staffing, scheduling, marketing and budgeting."

Majercak is currently working with retiring co-directors Alan Silverstein and Laura Dubester to phase into the director's role. He is slated to formally start in that position around the beginning of October.

Majercak said his primary goal will be to oversee a transition in the behind-the-scenes operations of CET, while perpetuating its basic mission, role and activities.

"Alan and Laura were a major reason for the success of CET," he said. "Some things will have to change in the way the organization runs itself, because they will no longer be the glue here. I see my role as continuing the work we've done, while looking at what we will need to do to change and grow. My goal is to ensure that CET is built to last so that it will still be here for at least another 30 or 90 years, long after I and my own successor have gone."

Majercak emphasized that these changes will be largely internal. "This won't affect our role or public activities," he said. "Our approachability and the practical nature of our programs are the heart and soul of CET. That's what originally attracted me to CET, and I believe the public appreciates that we offer practical solutions based on solid science. That won't change."

While he currently lives closer to CET's Northampton-area office and has worked primarily in the Pioneer Valley and Springfield area, Majercak said he expects that the organization's main administrative offices will remain in Pittsfield.

"One advantage of modern technology is that with a laptop and a phone, I can take my work with me anywhere," he said. "So I'll have a desk at all of our offices and will be dividing my time among them."◆



Longtime CET employee John Majercak will transition into his new role as executive director of the nonprofit environmental organization this fall.

creating jobs and business opportunities in manufacturing, installation and other related activities.

"Efficiency is one of the cornerstones of sustainability," said Silverstein. "People and businesses are recognizing that it really can be an efficient and cost-effective way to do things, and is beneficial for the economy in the long run."

They also believe that there is a heightened public determination to protect the environment as the stakes have intensified.

"Today, there is much greater awareness of the environmental consequences of our actions, both as a society and as individuals," said Dubester. "More people recognize how interconnected the environment is with other issues. For example, protecting the environment is now also widely viewed as a matter of public health."

She also believes that the issue of climate change has added to the sense of urgency. "Al Gore had a lot to do with changing the conversation," she said. "His film *An Inconvenient Truth* was a watershed in raising awareness of the connections of all of these issues and the importance of acting now to protect the earth."

Environmentalism has also long had a political dimension. In general, since the 1960s, liberals and progressives have tended to be more supportive of environmentalism, while conservatives and the business community have tended to be more skeptical or critical.

Although the controversial aspects settled down somewhat in the 1990s, over the past decade these differences have reemerged as the nation has become more politically polarized. Current proposals to implement cap-and-trade policies regarding CO2 emissions, for example, have encountered strong resistance in some quarters.

But Dubester and Silverstein believe that, overall, a larger consensus on the importance of environmental protection and support for the principals of sustainability have taken hold among the general public to a degree that transcends politics.

"It is important to see it in nonpartisan, nonpolitical terms," said Dubester. "Most people believe the scientific evidence and fully support the concept of protecting and preserving the earth. There will always be some people who deny the evidence for whatever reason. But the vast majority want to do the right thing for the environment, whatever their political beliefs are."◆

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