

BY DAN BRIODY

KEEPING *it* REAL

A national trend takes root locally

it

has been a rapid
and steep ascent up the
sustainability learning curve
for many of us over the last few years.

Terms like *carbon trading*, *zero waste*, *hybrid*, *fair trade*, and *corporate social responsibility* are suddenly a regular part of casual cocktail conversation. And though this rapidly evolving language of sustainability is undeniably important, it can be abused, overused, and otherwise misunderstood.

For such a complex and progressive concept, the definition of sustainability is stunningly simple: living, working, playing, and doing business in a way that protects the quality of life on this planet. That's it. That simple metric can be applied to everything from the stores we patronize to the homes we build. And more and more these days, the notion of sustainability is resonating on a local level.

In Fairfield, sustainability extends to commercial properties like the Promenade at the Brick Walk—the newest Fairfield shopping complex on the Post Road from Kleban Properties (see sidebar on next spread). The developer used highly efficient materials like recycled roofing, concrete siding instead of wood, solar panels on light posts, low-energy lighting, and on-site water treatment and reuse. The shopping, living, and working center minimizes “curb cuts,” or the amount of times cars need to enter and exit from the Post Road, allowing for more comfortable

ILLUSTRATION BY LINDA HELTON



pedestrian traffic, and taking the emphasis off of driving.

“To me sustainability is about holding ourselves accountable,” says Dina Brewster, manager of The Hickories, an organic farm in Ridgefield. The Hickories practices an increasingly popular system called community supported agriculture, or CSA, in which local families contribute \$500 a year in exchange for a share of the farm’s annual harvest—one that includes everything from fruits and vegetables to dairy and pork products. The payment is non-refundable and not dependent on the health of the harvest, making

the CSA about economic sustainability as well.

“Everyone wants to save the last spotted owl, and that’s great,” says Brewster. “But what about the farms? Ridgefield used to be a closed food loop. It produced enough food for itself. But we can’t feed ourselves anymore. So we’re the last farm in a town in which every street and neighborhood is named after a farm. And our economic viability is dependent on sharing the risk. Otherwise, one bad year, and we lose the farm.”

This year 120 families will be buying into the CSA at The Hickories, says Brewster. And she has a waiting list for hundreds more. “People seem to get it. They realize that there is another option, that we can produce what we consume, and we can produce more responsibly.”

A RELATIVE GOOD

Many local businesspeople are quick to point out that sustainability is not synonymous with strict environmentalism. Though caring for and protecting the environment in which we live are indeed important elements of sustainability, asceticism is not a prerequisite.

Take for example White Flower Farm in Litchfield. A mail-order nursery since 1950, White Flower Farm is one of the biggest growers of ornamental plants and bulbs in the country. It ships plants all over the U.S. and procures them from around the world. “But we’re not organic,” says Eliot Wadsworth, a former investment banker who left Wall Street and bought White Flower Farm in 1976. “We don’t produce everything we sell, we send

catalogues through the mail, and we use chemicals and pesticides. If you think the purest form of sustainability is a business that can function independent of the grid, we’re a long way from that.”

Wadsworth’s modesty belies the strenuous efforts he’s undertaken to protect land in Litchfield County. He is the organizer of The Litchfield Hills Greenprint



Project, an effort to better coordinate land conservation throughout the county. By using sophisticated mapping



SUSTAINABLE SHOPPING

Hidden green features at the Brick Walk

Most of the sustainable attributes of the new Promenade at the Brick Walk shopping complex on the Post Road won’t be all that obvious to shoppers. They’ll be noticing the new stores—like Trek Bicycles—and restaurants—like Obika mozzarella bar—and the flat-screen TV in the parking garage, advertising specials. But the slate-like EcoStar shingles made from 80-percent recycled materials and energy-efficient compact fluorescent lighting aren’t likely to get much attention. That’s OK, says developer Ken Kleban of Kleban Properties, who is behind the development. “We’re one of the largest developers in Fairfield, and we have a responsibility to set an example.” What he wanted to do was get as close to an energy-efficiency ideal as possible—so that his latest endeavor in Fairfield will be as maintenance-free, comfortable, and as easy on the environment as possible. It’s also built to be certifiable by LEED standards.

He started by installing 28 photovoltaic cells on the roof of

technology, Wadsworth is bringing together several local land trusts to purposefully protect critical watersheds, forests, and farmland.

To fund the land acquisitions, he advocates making small, thoughtful concessions to developers, a strategy the conservation purists don't always agree with. But to Wadsworth, sustainability has a simple set of guiding principles: "We want to do things that are logical, natural, and reasonable," he says—playing to the essence of what sustainability is.

BUILDING CONSENSUS

Sustainability is a sweeping term, open to many interpretations. But there are some industries that have already taken steps to codify the concept. Building design

and construction is one such industry. For example, in just the last decade the entire real-estate supply chain—from materials producers to designers to construction companies to home buyers—has been revolutionized by the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Green Building Rating System.

LEED certification is granted by the U.S. Green Building Council, a non-profit, non-governmental organization consisting of developers, architects, engineers, contractors, and building owners. And the certification criteria can be expensive, challenging, and onerous. There are LEED rating systems for commercial buildings, schools, retail outlets, healthcare facilities, homes, and neighborhoods.



Projects are evaluated on everything from the type of light bulbs used to the labor practices employed in the procurement of materials. "LEED covers everything," says Dan Berta, executive vice president of retail banking at Fairfield County Bank. Berta is overseeing the design and development of a LEED-certified branch in Westport, a 4,500-square-foot facility expected to be completed in 2010. "We already have some expertise in how to design a building, but when you're building a LEED-certified building,

you need to go back and reevaluate everything; carpeting, lighting, plumbing—even parking."

The bank is also reevaluating all of its 21 branches throughout Fairfield County, and will be working to "green" each of them. As part of the effort, their head of facilities management became LEED certified. "We thought it would be an important skill set to have in-house," says Berta.

GREENWASHING

With so much hype around sustainability, it's easy to be skeptical. And it's hard to say what exactly caused such a rapid and radical change in thinking. Some people think it was energy costs. Others credit Al Gore's seminal documentary film, *An Inconvenient Truth*. Regardless of the catalyst,

one building at the Patriot Plaza in the fall of 2007, and now a link on his website lets visitors follow how much energy those solar panels are producing and how much carbon emissions they are keeping out of the atmosphere as a result. As of this writing, the greenhouse gases they had offset was equivalent to the energy to power 221 homes for one day.

In the overall scheme of the development, though, solar panels are only a small part of the smart design. "Insulation is underestimated," says Jack Franzen, the architect behind the project. "But you can get 65-percent efficiency just from the proper insulation." In the case of the Promenade, they used rigid insulation on the outside of the rafters to prevent heat from being conducted to the outside. Franzen's firm, J.P. Franzen Associates Architects, P.C., specializes in historic renovation—and saving old buildings from teardown is one of the most environmentally friendly ways to approach building. They were responsible for turning the former Westport Bank and Trust brick property on the Post Road in Westport into the new Patagonia store, and getting the property listed on the National Register of Historic Sites.

While shoppers visiting the Brick Walk's shops—including, Fairfield Stationers, Papyrus, and New England Multisport (an athletic-apparel store)—aren't likely to be thinking about water waste, the increase in cars and tenants means a lot of increased pressure on the sewage system. Below shoppers' feet, pumps beneath the manhole covers are processing all the complex's water on-site, some to be used for irrigating plants that line the parking lot, and the rest circulated back into the grid to replenish aquifers. "If that water off the roofs, driveway, and gutters went into the storm-sewer system," says Franzen, "any runoff goes to Long Island Sound."

Sustainable development is not only good for the developer—who will benefit from the long lifespan of his composite materials and from the cost savings as energy prices rise—but it's good for the long-term vision for the town. Mark Barnhart, the director of community and economic development in Fairfield, says, "The Kleban family is in the forefront with innovative design features in their developments. They strive for higher quality, and they are able to attract a higher-quality clientele as a result." —Brita Belli