



Revving Petaluma:

SUSTAINABILITY CIRCLES IN ACTION



BY JAY HARRIS

Petaluma, California, population 59,000, was once known as “the egg capital of the world,” and decades later it was briefly dubbed “Telecom Valley.” Today it retains some agrarian roots, but the town’s mixed economy of technology, craft, food, and agriculture is facing 21st-century dilemmas: a city budget that hasn’t fully recovered from the recession, a four-year drought, and bottom-line pressures on its businesses and government, coming in part from booming, high-tech San Francisco, an hour south.

In the context of many attention-demanding priorities, how and where does sustainability fit in? Last fall, I visited the city’s first REV Sustainability Circle to find out.

A few months before, five local companies belonging to national and regional brands plus three public institutions had signed up for the REV Sustainability Circle process, each committing \$3,500 and two people to once-a-month, all-day peer circle meetings for six months, plus homework in between meetings. The REV curriculum included sessions with experts on energy efficiency, water use and waste reduction, responsible procurement, and metrics, and would take the participants through the steps of crafting “Sustainability Action Plans,” selling the plans internally, and then setting them into motion. Critically, the REV promise to participants was about more than doing right by the environment. By implementing comprehensive sustainability plans, they were told they would save their organizations money and help their businesses compete.

Circle participants included Lagunitas Brewing Company, Traditional Medicinals, and Straus Family Creamery, which are established regional and national brands. They are important players in the Petaluma economy, but in the grand scheme of American industry they are mid-sized enterprises: companies with between 100 and 500 employees. In the urgent effort to fight climate change, that makes their work with REV especially significant. According to the US Census Bureau, there were 141,358 such companies nationwide in 2010, and collectively they represent a hard-to-know but significant percentage of energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions. But unlike larger corporations, few small and mid-sized businesses can afford staff whose primary work centers on environmental impact, and there’s the rub: How do these companies find their way onto the sustainability track? Many cash-strapped municipal governments and their agencies — responsible for light, heat, cooling, procurement, and water for large public enterprises — are caught in a similar bind. REV’s Sustainability Circles seem to offer a way forward, with dividends for the companies and government as well as the environment.

Susan Hopp, one of REV’s energetic coaches for the Petaluma circle, said the effectiveness of the circle process rests on three Cs: content, collaboration, and communication.

Content is the expertise and ideas brought into the monthly gatherings.

Collaboration grows directly from the peer circle experience: the circles build bonds and local support networks among the people responsible for

sustainability in their organizations — relationships intended to long outlast the six-month REV curriculum.

And in REV parlance, communication covers a lot of ground, from articulating clear action plans with metrics and projections of financial returns, to strategies for organizational buy-in, to communicating goals and accomplishments, to customers and suppliers.

Alexandra Fox, sustainability manager of Straus Family Creamery, said the process helped turn sincere, but vague, aspirations into specific goals with timelines, and helped turn “one-off ideas into a holistic plan.”

The circle participants gather for their graduation day in a windowless conference room, taking spots around a square of tables facing a screen displaying PowerPoint slides. The setting is out of “Dilbert,” but the atmosphere in the room skews high-school reunion. People greet each other as old friends, and energy is high.

The team from Santa Rosa Junior College said they framed their detailed plan — covering facilities, transport, procurement, and even the student garden — within the strategic goal of creating a culture of sustainability, “so that it’s just muscle memory.”

“We’ve started to look at our whole campus in a different way,” Jane Saldaña-Talley, vice president of SRJC Petaluma, told me.

The Straus Family Creamery plan included 19 initiatives, ranging from new yogurt cups that use 50 percent less plastic to an ambitious 100 percent water recapture goal to “poop-to-power” methane digesters.

The Amy’s Kitchen plan elevated sustainability to the level of the



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company’s other top business priorities: quality, safety, and profitability. The Amy’s Kitchen team recruited an internal group of 10 sustainability advisors from across the company to guide work in five areas, including the “activation” of employees’ embedded environmental values.

With its parks, streets, transit, police and fire departments, a substantial vehicle fleet, community centers, and a municipal airport, the city of Petaluma found many opportunities for cost-saving investments. Their replacement of 4,000 lightbulbs with LEDs, for example, will require an initial investment of \$1.75 million but will save \$145,000 annually in energy costs. Their “biomass to biofuel” waste-to-energy initiative should produce the equivalent of 150,000 gallons of diesel fuel per year. And a new city policy mandating electric vehicle charging stations in new private developments will build the infrastructure to support greener habits. The Petaluma team sees the city’s plan as part of a broader strategy to attract and retain sustainable businesses. In order to lead by example, sustainability metrics such as kilowatt-hours reduced, recycled water delivered, solid waste diverted from landfills, and more, will be added to the city’s annual report.

The team from Petaluma City Schools was blunt about their primary motive: saving money. Their plan included reducing water and electricity use by 30 percent each over the next four years and bringing solid waste “close to zero.”

They estimated “cost avoidance” of \$1.4 million over that period. As important as the money is to the cash-strapped school system, the deeper cultural mission of the schools wasn’t overlooked.

“We have a responsibility to teach our children,” Renee Semik, principal of Petaluma Junior High, told the group. “They’re our future leaders in sustainability.”

At 4 p.m., just before their presentation, the Lagunitas Brewing Company team brought out their beer. With taglines like “ruthlessly delicious IPA” and “lager like you like it,” they furthered the social aspect of this social-serious occasion. Eppa Rixey and Kyle Salzberger conceded that due to their rapid growth, everyone in the company is stretched, and they’ve kept the sustainability team small to conserve people’s time. Their detailed plan covered every aspect of operations, from solar roofs to paper towels and low-flow toilets. Their “awesome goals” included producing zero waste by 2030, 100 percent renewable power by 2026, and moving 80 percent of their shipments to rail by 2025. Adoption of new water-treatment technology in the water-intensive brewing process is projected to save 22 million gallons of water a year in parched California. Their financial analysis said that a \$17 million investment, primarily in water treatment and solar, will net annual cost savings of \$5 million. Rixey, strategic planning manager at Lagunitas, told the group, “We’re stoked!”

Indeed, as circle participants moved

outside for photos in the bright afternoon sun, it seemed like everyone was stoked. Altruism, camaraderie, and detailed, sharp-penciled plans have converged to make ambitious goals seem, in this moment, anyway, very achievable. And is that human energy — the essential juice for turning these plans into measurable progress — sustainable? If it is, the connections from the circle will be the flywheel.

“This is family,” Jamie King of the Petaluma schools told the REV Circle. “Call me anytime.”

Photos: REV



Jay Harris is best known for his career as a publisher and media consultant — he’s helped build such indie media stalwarts as *Mother Jones* and *The Hightower Lowdown* — but lately he’s been indulging his inner journalist. With national politics as gummed up as they are, Jay is especially interested in writing stories that show the power of markets and enterprise to drive desperately needed change.