

Manitoba Planners Conference Feb 23-25, 2012
“Beyond Surviving: Planning To Thrive”

Title of presentation: “Beyond Surviving: From Breakdown to Breakthrough”

Presented by: Dave Wann

Date: February 23rd, 2012

David Wann, well known writer, speaker, film-maker on sustainable lifestyles began his keynote address at the Manitoba Planners Conference in Brandon, MB by giving Canada and Manitoba some high praise, “ *Manitoba has over 100,000 lakes which is an incredibly rich heritage so you must preserve your land and what you have all around you: you must be very proud.*” He then gave a nod to all the City of Brandon planners and politicians in the room including the mayor sitting close to the front, by saying that the recent municipal composting initiative in Brandon is the kind of initiative that helps us preserve our land. Encouraging sustainable behavior said Wann is the kind of work we should all be doing. Lots of nodding heads bobbed about in the room which made me wonder how many people in the room really, composted. As if hearing my thoughts Wann said that our difficulties stem from not wanting to change our high consumption and materialistic lifestyle ways en lieu of a more sustainable lifestyle. If we want healthy communities we must ask ourselves “*what makes a place great and grow planners that create works of art that benefits our communities.*”

Like any true optimist Wann began with the good news first: that smatterings of healthy sustainable policies are happening already in the world today though mostly in Europe. Mandatory family leave, pro-rated benefits for part-time workers, higher taxes on energy use and pollution in exchange for lower income taxes are just some of the forward thinking policies that encourage health and wellness, a phrase Wann cited frequently as he did wealth and hellness a phrase he used to describe the state of our society today. But just in case we needed another tablespoon of hope Wann gave some historical examples that indeed demonstrated that a more sustainable and holistic future is possible. He cited Cuba’s sustainable farming practices that allowed the island to feed itself once the former USSR stopped subsidies in the 1990s and Japan’s admirable 18th century cultural values that applauded minimalism and efficiency making the tea ceremony, the pursuit of knowledge and craft making today’s equivalent of Hollywood’s walk of fame.

The bad news is that most of us belong in that other camp: the one where run-away debt, high consumption rates, waste and resource depletion are daily realities as we use 30 acres per person while the world only has 5 acres per person to use including wildlife. It’s also the same camp where long queues at starbucks, the apple store or lululemon are as common as the polluted air we breathe. Dotted throughout his presentation were encouraging words that urged

everyone to shift toward a healthier and more responsible lifestyle by adopting ‘the back backer strategy. ‘An apt and familiar (remember small is beautiful) metaphor that says use what you need on your life’s journey and nothing more. For a backpacker that means food, a book and a fleece. Hmmm I thought I wonder if there is room for my coffee grinder in my backpack?

But even if Wann’s ‘backpackers advice’ and the ‘small is beautiful’ motif was a repeat for some in the audience and my guess it was for the majority of boomer professionals in the room there was an urgency at the heart of his message which was clear: change is possible, change needs to happen and your responsible for it. Throughout his long list of local examples of what you can do to elicit sustainable change in your neighborhood Wann didn’t let anyone off the hook. From walking to work, to supporting local producers and healthy school lunch programs he made it clear that there is work to do for everyone. In a very polite, informative and complete way Wann was able to say to each individual in the room that we are all responsible for the kind of community we live in and if we want a healthy one, we had better snap into action while we still can!

Summarized by:

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