

# ECOSTATES

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BRIGHT IDEAS FROM THE STATES

## Environmentally Sustainable Lifestyles: Households as Partners in Environmental Stewardship

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by Langdon Marsh

Citizens in an Oregon community took environmental responsibility seriously—and launched an innovation in the State and across the nation.

In Portland, Oregon, a group of citizens stood before the City Council last year and reported on a neighborhood environmental program that had brought about remarkable changes in their lives. Motivated by concern about their environment and a commitment to making

sure there would be enough resources available for their children to live decent lives, they had set about reducing their resource use and making more “eco-wise” purchases. They came with impressive statistics: 50% less garbage sent to the landfill, 34% less water used, auto emissions reduced by 20% and 9% less energy used, as well as an average household savings of \$265 per year. They had made these lifestyle changes in cooperation with their neighbors, whom they had gotten to know and like in the process. They came forward to encourage the city to sponsor, on a community-wide scale, the program that had made these changes possible, the Household EcoTeam Program.

This program is an enjoyable educational experience that brings together five or six neighboring households—EcoTeam—to support each other as they literally redesign their lifestyles for resource-efficiency. Its tools include a step-by-step four-mouth workbook, peer support, and quantitative feedback about the impacts of actions taken. Its developer, the nonprofit Global Action Plan for the Earth (GAP), offers the program through municipal service contracts, in the form of large-scale initiatives called Community Lifestyle Campaigns. Campaigns are underway in major metropolitan areas as diverse as Chattanooga, Tennessee; Kansas City, Missouri; and

Portland, Oregon.

This new approach to voluntary behavior change is rightly attracting attention among local government agencies and regulatory authorities that grasp that the residential sector is the next big playing field for environmental improvement. Based on the initial results in two Oregon

cities—Portland and Bend—the State is seeking to provide financial support to help bring Community Lifestyle Cam-

paigns to seven more cities. To us, the opportunity couldn't be more timely, from the vantage point of a State that faces a swelling population and a limited financial base for providing it with services. The GAP program will be an important new tool for helping achieve environmental quality improvement and resource conservation in the coming years.

Why? It is becoming clear that State and local governments have to involve larger and larger sectors of the public in reducing their environmental impact. While not relaxing our attention to business and industry,

we have to reach further to work with citizens in their roles as consumers and users of resources, homeowners, drivers and commuters. Households are responsible for 35% to 85% of the resource use in most communities. The environmental issues that remain mostly unsolved are more and more the responsibility of ordinary citizens—air quality and traffic congestion, poor water quality from excess lawn and garden watering and chemical use, runaway energy bills, overflowing landfills.

Obviously, you can't deal with these millions of people by anything remotely resembling traditional command-and-control strategies. You can

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attempt to induce changes through incentives or financial signals, as Oregon and other states have with bottle bills and recycling programs. But these initiatives take tremendous work. And, unless they are handled with transcendent wisdom, new incentive systems are known for the backlash they generate.

Hence the growing interest in voluntary initiatives that are effective and attractive. GAP's genius is in getting citizens and government working on the same side. Offering structure combined with choice, the Campaigns engage and support citizens as problem-solvers. It's non-regulatory, and therefore non-threatening.

Funded by one or more municipal agencies, GAP can customize the Community Lifestyle Campaign to make it a delivery vehicle for municipal information that would otherwise be stuffed into mailings and tossed by most citizens. In Portland, the Campaign has gotten 90-day free transit passes into the hands of EcoTeams (increasing ridership among these people by 242%); supported an electric lawnmower program; and educated citizens on the importance of prudent lawn watering practices during peak water demand periods.

Benefits are twofold: improving the efficiency of existing environmental programs and services through neighbor-to-neighbor outreach, and at times making it possible to delay or downsize costly infrastructure investments through more prudent use of resources. The Campaign is also a channel for citizens' input to local government on their patterns of resource use, and the policies and services that would best support more resource-efficient lifestyles.

We are especially excited about the ability of the EcoTeam Program to reduce vehicle-miles traveled, through increasing ridership on public transportation and a menu of other actions that get people out of single-occupancy vehicles. GAP's

approach has been well received at major conferences on transportation alternatives such as the RailVolution conference held in St. Louis in October 1997. Its Chattanooga campaign has received major funding from EPA's Office of Mobile Sources as a test site for a strategy that can help cities across the country deal with the challenge of Clean Air Act compliance. In Portland, GAP is achieving a 20% reduction in auto emissions per participating household. Because it helps individuals genuinely reorganize their lives to make

new transportation habits realistic, GAP's program is a breakthrough in travel demand management.

The EcoTeam

Program also contains ingenious elements that develop environmental literacy, cultivate self-help and team learning skills, encourage self-responsibility, and generally produce the qualities in citizens that we in government value.

There is widespread attraction to lifestyles that are simpler, less cluttered and more deliberate. Independent research on the market for GAP's programs in four typical cities showed high interest in participation, confirmed by GAP in the field. That interest is fueled by simple, commonly held values, such as people's desire to leave enough resources

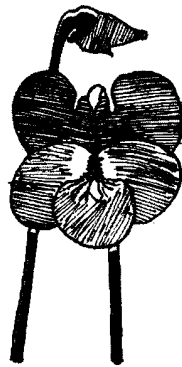
for their children to live decent lives, and their eagerness to get to know their neighbors. By creating a structure that translates these sentiments into action, GAP provides an exciting new approach to engaging citizens as true partners in the stewardship of resources.

For more information, contact Global Action Plan at 914-679-4830 or by e-mail at [info@globalactionplan.org](mailto:info@globalactionplan.org).

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