

Sustainability Committee Minutes

14 September 2009 Monday 11:30 am Lang Center Keith Room

Attending: Amanda Bayer, Mark Davis, Evelyn Strombom, David Burgy, Eric Chiang, Joy Charlton, Nicole Lewis, Rebecca Ringle (Lang Intern), Ralph Thayer, Carr Everbach

Carr began the meeting with the question of precedent for the Sustainability Committee based upon how it responds to the chicken coop proposal. Alternatives include recommendation for, recommendation against, no recommendation, or recommendation with suggestions. Alternatively, SusCom could forgo any decision or just post the minutes of our discussions on our website so that other decision-makers can see the pros and cons. The Sustainability Committee has no authority to fund any project, or oversee it, or to grant/deny permission for its implementation.

Members differed on the appropriate course of action, irrespective of the merits of the particular proposal. Among the observations were that merely publishing the minutes would not end an issue; those with authority to grant permission (e.g., President's Office, Grounds, Facilities) expect some guidance from our committee. Students, however, may believe that our committee has the power to grant permission for use of resources, which it does not. The Swarthmore Foundation is the source of funds in this case and they require proposers to obtain permission to implement their proposals. Perhaps the Sustainability Committee could pass judgment on whether a proposal should be under consideration by those with authority or not? It would be presumptuous of our committee to recommend funding or granting permission for a project since we may not have all the information. One strong "con" could trump all the "pros" we see in a proposal. We cannot guarantee that we have considered every possible issue or pitfall.

There was general agreement that there is not enough time and expertise in the Sustainability Committee to work through half-complete proposals, iterating ideas with the proposers. Rather, only proposals in their final form should be considered by SusCom.

Our committee does have the power to evaluate the sustainability worth of a proposal, however, and to list pros, cons, and concerns that decision-making authorities should consider. Thus, instead of assessing logistical, financial, or legal feasibility, we focus on identifying the environmental value of a proposal and raising issues related to increasing this value for the College community. In short, our committee can help define what the working definition of "sustainable" is on campus by articulating those aspects of a proposal that promote the culture change we hope to bring about.

As regards the chicken coop proposal, therefore, we identify those aspects of the proposal that promote sustainability:

1. The proposed project is educational for those students who design and build the chicken coop, both as part of design experience and as hands-on learning involving problem-solving, communication, and politics. Those who tend the chickens will learn skills that may be useful to them later (e.g., participation may increase the probability that former students start chicken coops of their own later in life). There is the multiplied benefit in the long term if households practicing small-scale agriculture reduce their food packaging waste, transportation and refrigeration energy, and kitchen waste sent to landfills.
2. The project is educational for those members of the College community who participate indirectly through discussions with workers, visits to the facility, and reading materials on-line, in publications (including news reports), and posted on signs at the site. Specifically, the learning involves consciousness-raising concerning the widespread practice of grain feeding of chickens ("King Corn"), health issues associated with conventionally-produced food, and the sustainability advantages of supporting the local economy.
3. The actual eggs produced would be a negligible fraction of weekly egg consumption at Sharples, but over time a large number of people would have eaten a Swarthmore egg and likely learned about the project.

Given that the proposed project's sustainability content is largely tied to its educational value and not energy/resource reductions, its outreach component could be strengthened. Provisions for educational components such as the showing of documentary films, inviting guest lectures, and suggesting readings on food and the effects of industrial farming could be included. Signage was addressed only lightly in the proposal, but will be important if the facility is accessible to the visiting public. Academic departments or entities whose curricula or student organizations (e.g., student chapters of professional engineering societies) that could provide educational links to the project include Education, Engineering, Psychology, Environmental Studies, and Biology, among others.

The potential concerns and "cons" that SusCom and the proposers discussed in earlier meetings included: questions of safety (chickens' and humans'); smell, noise, and aesthetics; students' time commitment to the project; optimal size of initial project; waste disposal; veterinary care for and IACUC-compliant handling of the chickens; and provisions for chicken care during student vacations. SusCom also suggested that the proposal include a map of the location of the site and sketches to demonstrate to skeptics that the project can look nice. For details of this discussion, see the SusCom meeting minutes for Sept. 2, 9, and 14 posted at: <http://www.swarthmore.edu/suscom.xml>. For project details, see the proposers' web site, at: <http://www.sccs.swarthmore.edu/org/swatchix/>.

Overall, we believe the proposed chicken coop proposal has the potential to contribute to sustainability education. Those charged with making the final decisions may wish to consider requiring that the students secure three volunteers

from the faculty and staff to serve as an oversight committee to monitor the project and to expand it or close it down, depending upon its success.

The meeting ended with a discussion about the green revolving loan fund and what tools the Sustainability Committee will use to assess potential investments. Unlike the chicken coop proposal, projects for consideration for funding through this fund must generate money via savings sufficient to **replenish** the fund. Only those proposals that produce a monetary return will be considered; proposals will be ranked and discussed based partly on the rate of expected return and the sustainability benefits of the project.

The next SusCom meeting will be Monday, September 21, 2009, 11:30 am- 12:30 pm in the Lang Center. The main agenda topic will be organizing the get-together of sustainability-related groups to share ideas/plans and prepare a slide show for the October 1 local-foods dinner in Sharples.

Meeting adjourned at 12:35 pm.

Respectfully submitted, Carr Everbach