

**Montpelier Planning Commission**  
**November 24, 2008**  
**City Council Chambers, City Hall**

*Subject to Review and Approval*

**Present:** Karen Vogan, Chair; David Borgendale, Vice Chair; Anne Campbell, Matthew DeLorey, and Youth Member Arianna Lewis.

**Call to Order:**

Karen Vogan, Chair, called the Planning Commission meeting to order at 6:45 P.M. in Council Chambers of City Hall. The Planning Commission resumed their meeting at 7:00 P.M. at Unitarian Church to a Transition Town Presentation “Transition Towns: From Oil Dependency to Resilient Communities: by Naresh Giangrande, Co-Founder of Transition Town Totnes, UK.

Naresh Giangrande is the co-founder of the first Transition Town in Totnes in the U.K. Transition Towns in Totnes in the U.K. Transition Towns began in September 2006 and has since morphed into a worldwide movement with over official Transition Towns, cities, counties, and islands, and several thousand who are considering this model for positive change. ‘Transition Town’ is an inspiring vision and action plan for how a community can transition to energy lean, carbon constrained, and relocalised future that is abundant, sustainable, pleasurable, and resilient.

Annie Flaherty, a member of the team of Transition Town Montpelier, said they are here tonight to celebrate a coming together of many movements with many ideas for decades. Many people have been working resiliency and there is a groundswell right now all over the United States and in the world. She presented a background on the beginning of Transition Town Montpelier. Several attended a post carbon sustainability network meeting last June in North Montpelier and they decided to look at the Transition Town Handbook. Transition Town is “Us.” We are the ones who are going to move us forward to a way of resilient living. They will be forming working groups for working with other initiatives in town like enVision Montpelier and they want to acknowledge the Mazer grant they received to help do the work. There will be a Transition Town training here in Montpelier for those who want to be involved. A lot of what this is about is networking and letting everyone know what is going on in different parts of the state as well as the country and the world.

Ms. Flaherty introduced the Transition Montpelier Team to the group. She introduced Alistair Rock from Transition Town Portland, Maine. She believes Montpelier and Portland, Maine became official Transition Towns at the same time.

Alistair Rock from Transition Town Portland, Maine is part of the training group. He said they would be conducting training in Montpelier in March. The training is unusual in that it is not only about the issues of peak oil and climate change in Transition Towns, but it incorporates the psychology of change.

**Transition Towns: From Oil Dependency to Resilient Communities:**

Naresh Giangrande said he was pleased with the community spirit he felt present this evening, and community is what this project is all about. This gives him so much hope to speak at this sort of meeting. He has lived in Britain for 29 years but grew up in New Jersey and it is a fantastic privilege and pleasure to be present tonight.

We are at a historical moment of choice in our civilization. The choices we make now will affect generations to come in ways that are totally irreversible. It is down to us to make these changes and the changes and choices we make now will determine the future course for our children and our children's children in generations to come. He said he feels an intense urgency himself to do this work and he senses that from people he speaks to all over Great Britain and the world. The message of hope is that our destiny is in our hands and they think they have developed something in Totnes, U.K. that can help us make good choices in this world.

Primarily, he is here to talk about Transition Towns. It is about finding and releasing the collective genius of towns and individuals to use far less resources but if we do it we do it in a conscious way, that what we plan and design can be more resilient and better than what we have at the moment.

A Transition Town project is really very simple. It's a set of pathways. It starts with vision and then a set of pathways to the future, and a set of principles that guide those pathways. First, the question why do we need to transition? Why do we need to do this transition? The first thing most are aware of is climate change. There is an active carbon cycle on this earth and people who say climate change isn't a problem say CO2 isn't actually a pollutant, which technically speaking is not true. It's a natural form. It is a part of life and part of a natural carbon cycle. What the problem is when we are putting fossil fuel in and the CO2 is disrupting this balance. That combined with the carbon sinks in our atmosphere are throwing this balance out of kilter.

What is happening in our world is incontrovertible. The thing that really put the lid on the climate change today was the IPCC report that came out in 2007 that basically said that CO2 is a problem, it is causing our atmosphere to heat, and it is primarily human cause. There is no serious debate. There are quite a lot of other people who are intent on having us believe that there is a debate, but there is no debate. The science is clear, and we have to act; there is no question about that.

The second driver for a transition project is peak oil. When they first started Transition Towns there were a few people who didn't know what peak oil was, and obviously now he is talking to an audience who is well conversed in peak oil. The countries in green are the oil producers, and the countries in red have reached their peak or are past their peak. We are very close to oil peak production. Considering how dependent we are and how incredibly useful oil is this is an imperative. When this peak hits and when we find ourselves with less energy, and when 2.5 billion Chinese and Indians are trying to live the same sort of lifestyle as we are that says our lifestyle is going to have to change, whether we like it or not. This is inevitable.

He said he read a few weeks ago it is 1909 in China right now in terms of automobile usage. That is the number of automobiles there are per capita in China that there were in the United States in 1909. This gives a sense of where the Chinese are at and how fast they are trying to catch up. That is the sort of thing that is going to change our world.

Where are we going from here? If we look at a graph of energy resource population and pollution, we come from a pre-industrial sustainable culture and have risen this curve of population resource use. We have reached the point now where we are at a climax. There are four potential futures that we can choose, and we can choose them right now.

It is our current moment of choice. The first choice is a techno-fantasy. This is the scenario that there are no limits to growth, that every problem we face we will find a technological solution to it. Every problem that is thrown up in front of us we will find some way around those physical limits and just keep on growing both in population, resources and energy. When we run out of earth we will head for the moon and Mars and the rest of the planets. When we populate those, then we will head for the stars and go to distant galaxies. That is one possible scenario, and it is a very troubled one.

The second one he calls Green Textability. This is the idea that everything we do now unsustainably we will find a sustainable alternative. If we are driving around in cars fueled by hydro carbons, in the future we will have cars that will be fueled by windmills. There will be electric cars that will run on solar power or wind power. This is the idea that life will carry on more or less as it is, but at a slightly lower level of energy resource use. The problem with that is we have a large sector of the world's population that is trying to live the same sort of lifestyle we are, but, secondly, we live in a society that needs to grow. Our current economic system as we are facing, all facing, not only in the U.S. but Europe, this credit crunch and breakdown of our economic system at the moment, if we are going to follow this path of green textability we would have to redesign that whole system very rapidly.

The next scenario is earth stewardship. This is the path of energy dissent. This is very much the transition approach, and this is the idea we will have to get by on far less and we design that pathway that we can live even better than we what we live now on far less energy and far less resources.

The next pathway is what he calls Mad Max. This is the pathway that we will continue and do business as usual and continue to try to grow our economy but in the not so distant future the project will hit the buffers and there will be some disaster, a nuclear war, an intense conflict among nations for resources and the resulting crash will leave a stranded survivors fighting over the remains of a once great civilization.

Mr. Giangrande said those are the four scenarios and pathways to the future and right now it is our choice which one we want to take.

He next showed the four recognitions of a transition movement. The first is that life with less energy is inevitable so we might as well plan for it and do it consciously. The second one is that we have lost the resilience. We have systematically stripped out the resilience and the ability of ourselves to look after ourselves from our communities. He knows there is a large homesteading community here in Vermont who has consciously gone out to get those skills and retain those skills within the community. You are a far better place to weather the storms ahead with those skills in your community, but there are so many communities that don't have those skills and are going to really struggle to look after themselves just to get food to eat and get their clothing and heat their homes.

The third one is that we are going to need to act for ourselves. He knows he is coming to the heartland of the Yankee survivors, but our recognition is that we are going to have to. Nobody is going to do it for us.

The fourth is that by a mission of collective genius of our towns and countries we can live more enriched and satisfying lives than what we live now.

How do we get from where we are to a resilient and pleasurable future? He said he was going to take the audience through a transition model and the things they have done to get to create a change mechanism and process that gets us from where we are now to a sustainable future. The first part of the project is about visioning. What would a post carbon energy scarce world look like? There are a lot of different visions, some of them very dark and some very low level low impact living, but in fact we don't actually know what a low carbon energy scarce world would look like. We don't know what our transitioned world, a world that has been a high tech society and has lived very high off the energy hog, we don't know how that kind of a civilization can transition and what a transition feature might look like. It might be a combination of very low and very high tech, and a combination of very local but also global. That is the sort of thing we need to start doing. We need to start creating visions of a positive future.

One of the things he realized when he started doing the research for this project is that we have a collective inability, a collective blind spot about the future. Where would he find visions of the future? Where would he find images and ideas about the future? He looked at science fiction films. If you look at the Sci-Fi genre basically there are two scenarios that are presented to us. The first is the disaster scenario. It is a very dark scenario for the future. This is the Mad Max future where some disaster befalls us, whether it is nuclear war or an environmental disaster where we are left with a far reduced population who are fighting over the scraps of what are left.

The second scenario that is presented to us is the Star Wars future, and that is the idea there are no limits to growth and we can just carry on growing. There is basically nothing in between. The transition future doesn't really enter into our mindset or vision. This is the first thing that transition addresses because we ask people to vision what sort of future they want to live in, and they do collective visioning exercises as community so they start to develop a mutual vision of how we might live that is both abundant and pleasurable and take that forward as a community.

One of the first practical steps is you need an initiator. You have an initiating group here in Montpelier. You need to have a group of people this project because it is too big for just one or two people to do alone. This group of people is charged with the job of awareness raising and also providing vision for a sustainable future. The sorts of awareness raising events they did in Totnes, and increasingly they would see in other transition projects. It involved showing films, visiting speakers, seminars and workshops, and very practical events which are designed to raise people's awareness of low carbon living, low energy lifestyles and ways of living that might find that might suit them better than what they have now.

Another early part of the project is to creating practical manifestations. What he has found as he has gone around training other transition projects is there are always people who aren't really interested in putting on events, not interested in coming to committee meetings and talking. What they want to do is get out and doing something, or they are already doing something and they want to be part of the transition project. They don't want to wait around until they develop an energy dissent plan and develop a vision of a sustainable future; they are ready to move. That's fantastic. It is important to use that energy. This process is not a linear process. It's not a process that happens A, B, C, and D. We don't ascribe a way to go to a transition future. All he is doing here is giving you

a sense of how they have done it in Totnes and how he has seen it done in other parts of the

world. There are quite a group of people here who are already doing a lot of sustainable work and work in renewable energy and doing work in the farming and food sector. By all means, bring those people on board and get them as part of the transition project. Part of this is laying the foundations. You want to bring people on board. This is not about creating another agency that is going to compete. It's about bringing people together and forming an organization that takes an overview of what a transition future might look like. It starts to create a plan for how you might get to a resilient future.

An important thing that happens right at the beginning is that once the awareness raising has reached a certain level of energy and excitement we organize a great unleashing. We organize an event which marks a birthday of our project. It's a time to celebrate the great work that the people on the initiating group have done and to announce to the world that you are an official project and ready to move on to the next phase of the transition.

It is important at that point to translate the energy into practice, and to do that we start forming working groups. The job of the working groups is to start creating relocalization in the area. We are performing a service that the market is not going to perform for us. There is no function in the market that relocalizes your economy, and they see that as an essential aspect to build a good life for ourselves. All of the projects are designed to create resilience or to relocalize aspects of our lives.

The Totnes project has made quite an impression across the U.K. They have started printing their own money. They have the Totnes pound and exchange it for one pound sterling, and it is taken in about 80 shops and businesses in Totnes. There is about 10,000 pounds in circulation, which is not a lot; it's an experiment right now. They are not affiliated with any particular political party and don't have political affiliation. They are willing to work with anybody who is interested in doing the sort of things they are interested in.

He showed another project where they were planting nut trees in Totnes. It is their understanding they are going to need protein and protein for vegetarians is quite a difficult thing, and having nuts is a good way. The Town Council has taken on the transition project and all of the landscapes in Totnes are going to be edible landscapes, so anything that will be planted in Totnes will be either for medicinal or edible and nuts is one of the main things.

Another thing they like to do is to work with business because it is their understanding they are going to need a vibrant and resilient business sector. They are just working out how to work with businesses. One of the tools they have developed with Liverpool University is something called oil vulnerability auditing where they can go into businesses and audit all of their processes and work out exactly how vulnerable each process or each client group or each product line is to the price of oil. Whether oil is the raw material or the oil is used in transport, they can determine how vulnerable they are to the price of oil, and once they know that they can start mitigating against that. One of the things he likes about this is the way to get business peoples' attention is to start talking about their bottom line.

Each town here has an energy committee. The Totnes Renewable Energy Society is similar to that, and they understand it is going to be important for their future to own the renewable energy resources of the town. It is designed to be a collective ownership of the renewable energy resources so that it's not something that just a few individuals or a large corporation from outside owns but owned by the people of the locale. That is a model that is being replicated in several other transition towns now.

They have to work with local government, and local government, generally speaking, has been very cooperative and helpful. The Town Council has passed resolutions in support of transition towns. The local Chamber of Commerce survived as a result of the transition. One of the few things that have supported local businesses over the last couple of years has been things like transition towns.

A member of the audience inquired what the population of Totnes was.

Mr. Giangrande replied it was about 7 ½ thousand.

We are probably one of the most useless generations in the history of the planet. Most of us can barely cook our own food, let alone grow it or dry it. If it comes to making a bench or a piece of furniture he doubts that many can do that, either. Part of what they do is to encourage people to learn skills so they have workshops on bicycle maintenance and repair. What they do is to create ways that people can get the sort of skills that a low carbon low energy lifestyle will need.

They conduct interviews and talk to the elders of their community because they are holding a lot of the knowledge and wisdom that have come down to us through the ages. They know how to live low energy lifestyles. He was in an interview with an elderly gentleman and he was talking about the first refrigerator he bought and what life was like before that. They are interested in collecting and harvesting that wisdom and passing on that wisdom. Elders in our society have been greatly devalued, and this is something they value a lot.

He showed a slide of a gentleman who had one of the largest markets gardens in Totnes. Over the wall was the cattle market so the weekly livestock market was there. The manure from the market came over the wall into his vegetable garden, and then the vegetables went to his shop on the street. He is sure that model has been replicated in Montpelier and many other communities here in Vermont. It certainly was the norm 50 or 60 years ago. He only started growing vegetables in 1968. His son didn't want to take on the business. What this is now is a car park and part of it is now having houses built on it. That is a really good example of how the resiliency in our communities has been taken away and replaced by something that is not going to be very useful in a post carbon low energy world.

Something they had to learn as part of the project is you never know what is going to happen or how. Although they are very strategic in planning what they do, we also need to let it go where it wants to go. We need to let things happen how they need to happen.

Energy dissent pathways – they don't what the future is going to be like. They don't know what they actually are planning for. All they can do is create some vision, take stock of where they are now, create a vision of where we want to get to and try to identify

the steps for potential pathways that might get us to the sorts of places we want to be in. The way he sees energy dissent pathways is just developing some ideas, some potential blueprints for the future and we have to let go of what future might actually be and how the future might unfold. None of us knows the sort of timescale we are working with. None of us know when we are doing our planning what things are going to unfold and what things are going to be possible and what sort of timescale. There are a number of different communities in England who have now formed energy dissent pathways and going through some stages of the process, and many more will do so in the very near future.

He showed a short list of transition projects, which there are over 100 now. Montpelier and Portland, Maine aren't on the list. This is just the beginning of a list of the 1,000 plus communities around the world who are in some stage of thinking about becoming a transition town project.

What makes the transition model work? The use and creation of vision is an important part of what they do. Awareness raising, if people don't understand what the frames are or why we have to do this energy dissent then you aren't going to do it. It's not going to happen. When people see that other people are doing these sorts of actions, when other people start rearranging their lives, a momentum starts building and it is much bigger than all of the individual action. The kind of coming together of transition towns, the networking and collective response is very interesting.

Transition is both inner and outer. It is their understanding that the transition we have to make is not just about how many windows we need to put up or how many solar panels. The transition we have to make is inside of ourselves. It's the software we run on. It's our beliefs and our values. It's our psychology that has been built and is part of this world, this unsustainable world. We have unsustainable psychology within us that needs to change, and that's a very important part of the transition process.

We talk about a positive future. We don't present people with something negative or look at all of the problems. We create action and say this is a possibility of acting now. The other thing is the solution. The solution, as I see it, if you look at what needs to happen worldwide, it's enormous and overwhelming. But if you start breaking it down piece by piece, individual community by individual community, as we start working towards a sustainable future, suddenly the way transition is spreading it suddenly takes on the possibility of becoming something that is as big as the problems we are facing. The way this is spreading across the world gives him hope. It's a model that is easy to replicate and something that can happen all over the world.

Mr. Giangrande said there was a question about whether we are prescribing going back to futile times by becoming more local and whether this included other races. The United States is such a melting pot. They strive to be inclusive, and it is their understanding they have to include everybody if they are going to make this transition they need to make.