**THE SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE (SCI)** *– An Introduction*

**Mission:** The mission of the Sustainable Communities Initiative is to catalyze positive social, environmental, and economic change, locally and nationally, through the facilitation of voluntary citizen learning, research, and action.

**Primary Challenge:**

1. **Creating a Sustainable Society**
   1. “…we have been impoverishing the planet upon which we depend for life.” – Paul Hawken, Armory Lovins, Hunter Lovins, *Natural Capitalism*

**Secondary Challenges:**

1. **Defining Sustainability**
   1. “What is lacking is a clear unified vision of what sustainable development entails.” In short, without a coherent, relatively detailed, shared vision of what a sustainable society would look like, we lack the clearly defined ends required to guide our efforts – J. Farely
2. **Increasing Citizen Participation & filling the Social Infrastructure Deficit**
   1. “A new civic America has . . . taken shape since the 1960s, as professionally managed advocacy groups and institutions have moved to the fore, while representatively governed. . . voluntary membership federations. . . have faded from the everyday lives of most Americans.” – Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy*
   2. “Using various kinds of data, scholars have repeatedly demonstrated that U.S. associations founded after the mid-twentieth century often had no individual members... ” – Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy*
   3. “Precisely because social capital is essential for social movements, its erosion could shroud their prospects for the future.” – Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*
3. **Closing the Sustainability Knowledge Gap**
   1. “Fewer than 1 in 10 [Americans] say they are ‘very well informed’ about climate change, and 75% or more say they would like to know more.” – Yale University PCCC

**Towards Solutions – The SCI Program:**

1. **A Sustainability Course for the General Public**
   1. Community Based - Taught by area academics, NGO, business, and civic leaders
   2. Translocal - Focusing on the global, national, and local nature of the issues
   3. Accessible & Innovative – Affordable and comprised of online and in person instruction
2. **The Sustainable Communities Index**
   1. Defining sustainability in a clear and inclusive manner
   2. Delivering credible and transparent data on the sustainability of RI communities
   3. Providing citizens with a participatory learning and research opportunity
3. **Sustainability Action training and guidance for citizens** 
   1. Establishing a statewide infrastructure of Citizen Sustainability Committees
   2. Running leadership trainings and linking citizens with area NGOs
   3. Hosting translocal initiatives and events.

**TOWARDS SOLUTIONS – A CLOSER LOOK AT THE SCI PROGRAM**

In order to address the challenges outlined above, SCI will be comprised of three central programmatic offerings. These offerings are 1) An affordable and accessible Introduction to Sustainability course for the general public, 2) Assistance to citizens in the use of SCI’s Sustainable Communities Index (under development), and 3) Citizen sustainability action facilitation.

**The Introductory Course**

In an effort to address the large knowledge gap SCI will offer an enrichment course for any interested member of the public. This course will be an introductory survey course covering each of the major themes within sustainability. The course will be taught by NGO leaders, academics, and knowledgeable citizen advocates who have acquired specialized knowledge in their particular area of sustainability. The level of focus will be both macro and micro, where speakers will instruct on each issue at the global, national, state, and local levels.

Through the use of lecture capture software, this course will be made available via the worldwide web and will be offered as a blended learning course throughout RI. That is to say, some components of the course will be viewed online, while others will require occasional in person attendance.

**The Sustainable Communities Index**

SCI’s introductory sustainability course will be run in close coordination with the use of SCI’s Sustainable Communities Index (currently under development). This index will be a participatory research tool that will enable citizen users to score the sustainability of their own communities. With this tool the public will be empowered to track and report the sustainability performance of every town in RI and eventually beyond.

The Sustainable Communities Index will also give citizens a vocabulary with which to discuss complex sustainability issues. When used properly it will assist in the development of action planning and help citizens identify those areas that should be of utmost priority where they live. Ultimately the index should facilitate citizen action and, in so doing, amplify the voices of these critical stakeholders.

**Citizen Action Facilitation**

SCI will support citizen action by creating an institutional infrastructure composed of local voluntary sustainability committees and affiliated volunteer groups. Through these committees citizens will be able to more easily join together in sustainability efforts whether they are local, regional, or statewide.

In addition to creating a network of local sustainability committees, SCI will support citizen action by offering organizing and educational trainings through a variety of workshops and events. At these events citizens from different localities will be able to interact with one another and come together on issues that are much larger than the communities within which they live – e.g. watershed, foodshed, state, and national concerns – and provide additional support to more local efforts.

Finally, it is also of note that SCI will actively support collaborations between our participants and existing NGO’s that could greatly benefit from further citizen involvement – in essence funneling active supporters into existing NGO initiatives.