

Thurston-Mason Counties E3 Leadership Summit June 1, 2007

Results of Session 3: Lay of the Land Non-formal Education: Business/Workplace

The Business/Workplace participants offered the following responses when asked to comment on statements assessing the current status of environmental education in Washington. This summary reflects both comments generated by participants as a group and comments submitted in writing by individual participants.

There were two Business/Workplace groups participating in this session.

Lay of the Land

1. Most of the participants were doubtful about the claim that “many businesses see the health of the environment as important for attracting and retaining quality employees” and environmental education as necessary to produce these employees. They thought this statement might describe some businesses, but certainly not most. Most businesses do not apprehend the benefits of green policies and do not consider protecting the environment a priority. Regarding environmental issues, most businesses act because they must comply with federal regulations, not because they have adopted their own environmental business ethic. While businesses do want quality employees, few connect this with helping the environment. The participants therefore thought this statement sounded more like a challenge than an accurate assessment of the current lay of the land.

Additional observations:

- For some participants, these statements seemed to refer to large businesses. They thought it important to include small businesses.
- The statement fails to acknowledge that “business is ultimately about cost.”

2. There was somewhat mixed reaction to the statement that businesses are currently interested in “building ‘green,’ developing a ‘green image,’...promoting wellness, and/or selling ‘green’ products...” Most of the participants thought this was overstated, and a number suggested that many businesses cultivate a “green” image, but lack a genuine commitment to environmental causes and concerns. One of the groups suggested there is some danger in using the word “green” in this way, because it has become a superficial, over-used “buzz word.”

Additional observations:

- The statement should explain more thoroughly what it means to be green.
- Improved employee health helps reduce health care expenses and absenteeism.
- The number of businesses that are genuinely “green aware” is quite small, but is increasing.

3. Most of the participants had doubts about the availability of technical assistance, and said that if such assistance is currently available, it needs to be better communicated to the business community. The availability of assistance from the government was most strongly questioned.

Additional observations:

- Non-profits should also be mentioned.
- The statement currently says this assistance is designed to “*improve* ‘green’ business practices.” Most businesses are only just beginning to adopt such practices, so “improve” seems the wrong word here.

Other Observations & Suggestions:

- It would help to have a basic definition of business based on location and size (local, out of state, # of employees).
- Some participants discussed the difficulties surrounding current regulations. Some businesses are simply unfamiliar with regulations, while others find it more profitable to ignore them. Also, regulations are not being enforced or applied uniformly—possibly due to lack of education.
- Businesses can have an impact on market transformation to drive down costs of “going green.” If businesses demand it, it will become cheaper.
- Businesses need tax incentives to build green.
- The importance of natural resource based industries, which provide food and clothing, has not been recognized.

Challenges

1. Most participants agreed that businesses currently “have little time or resources to devote to ‘non-essential’ considerations.” Most said they considered it imperative to change what is considered essential. Some wanted the term “essential” defined.

Additional observations:

- At least one of the participants questioned whether the current understanding of what is non-essential is the result of self-interest or ignorance.

2. Most of the participants agreed that not all businesses see how a healthy environment will improve their workforce or how “green” practices will improve their bottom line. The participants recognized that business people must deal with a lot of other challenges and issues, and often do not recognize any connection to the environment. It was suggested that businesses might have an easier time seeing the value of “green” practices if they could see a demonstration of the concrete benefits such an investment might yield. Businesses might also

be more inclined to change the way they do business if the government were to “streamline the process,” making it both easier and less expensive to go “green.”

3. The participants agreed that businesses often have a negative impression of environmental protection because of the difficulties they have understanding and complying with complex regulations. While they acknowledged this problem, a number of participants indicated that they considered regulations necessary because businesses cannot be relied upon to “self police.” They suggested the following to assist businesses with the process:

- Raise awareness so businesses are better educated about the impact they have on the environment. Educate business owners, operators, managers and other decision makers about environmental issues, regulations, and opportunities.
- Make network resources available to small businesses.
- Build personal relationships between regulators and businesses to make the regulators’ role less confrontational.
- Make sure regulations are enforced.
- Educate environmentally conscientious members of the business community about the legislative process so they can manipulate this process to address their needs.

Other Challenges:

- It appears that chamber of commerce and industry officials are not at the E3 meetings. (Why not?)
- There is a general lack of leadership.
- Many perceive that the only way to produce a change is through government legislation. Yet many elected leaders are overwhelmed by other issues and demands, and tend to be reactionary rather than visionary as a result.
- Many businesses find it cheaper to ignore regulations.
- The costs associated with implementing change, along with the lack of any real desire to change, constitute the biggest challenges.

Opportunities to Build Upon

1. Most of the participants doubted that “competition to attract and retain quality employees” has generated more interest in environmental health and education. Some acknowledged that competition is a good idea in theory, but they were more dubious about the results in reality. The environment is simply a lower priority for employees/businesses when compared to other considerations.

Additional observations:

- Some participants suggested the outdoors industry might have a large role here.

- At least one participant found the statement confusing.

2. The participants agreed that the increasing number of consumers interested in green products and businesses constitutes a good opportunity.

3. The responses were a bit more mixed concerning the claim that the economic benefits of green business practices, both for businesses and utility providers, make them cost-effective. Some doubted or rejected this claim, while others offered the following observations and suggestions:

- Initial costs may be higher despite incentives, and it can take a long time for a business to realize an economic return on such an investment.
- Subsidies and tax incentives are needed to make the adoption of green practices affordable.
- More needs to be done to make businesses aware of incentives, and in particular to show that green business practices can reduce operating and maintenance costs. As more of these practices become mainstream, the costs associated with them should decline.
- Businesses need to be informed about environmentally sound options and about the businesses and agencies that can help them adopt green practices. Such information could be presented in a brochure.
- Something should be done to attract new and small businesses.
- Businesses need to receive some kind of official recognition or praise when they take the initiative to protect the environment.
- Business should face serious, undesirable consequences when their business practices cause environmental harm.

Other Suggestions:

- Make green practices relevant to specific industries and business sectors.
- Improve the effectiveness of communication about environmental issues and the actions they require by presenting a simplified, “big picture” explanation.
- Communicate to businesses how they can make a difference, and instill a sense of responsibility. Make sure communication is catered to the particular business or industry at hand.
- Articulate local expectations to incoming businesses so they are aware of their responsibilities within the community. Communicate what will put them in “good standing” in the community.
- The nature of communication between regulators and businesses needs to change so that it is less confrontational. One solution might be to bring in a third party to facilitate.



Education • Environment • Economy

E3 Washington is a project of the
Environmental Education
Association of Washington
www.e3washington.org

- Empower companies to develop their own environmental plans, which go above and beyond regulations.
- Create a coalition of local businesses to facilitate communication between industries and include them in the larger discussion with the community as a whole. Have members of the environmental education sector attend business gatherings such as the chamber of commerce.

This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.win2pdf.com>.
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only.
This page will not be added after purchasing Win2PDF.