

Environmental Challenges - Community Opportunities

By Doug Griffiths, President & CEO, 13 Ways Inc.

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The theme of this issue of Municipal World is the environment. That is a fitting subject at any time because the environment is an issue we must learn to address front and centre, and not just as a nation, but as communities and municipalities. Climate change is real and threatens the survival of the entire human race if we don't address it. We often believe it is up to national leaders and international accords to address the situation. However, significant solutions are available right in your community.

I know some folks still deny that humans are causing climate change, but I think that is based on a failure to consider just how profoundly humanity has changed in a very short span of time. Before the year 1500, the population of the entire Earth never exceeded 500 million people. In the span of 300 years, from 1500 to 1800, the world population almost doubled to reach 1 billion for the first time in history.

Over the next 150 years, our global population grew by 150% to reach 2.5 billion people by 1950. That occurred in conjunction with the industrial revolution, which saw our entire economy grow over 20 times larger and was based on the burning of fossil fuels. A mere 50 years later, the globe's population reached 6 billion people (yes, 3.5 billion more people in the span of 50 years) and our economic growth and the burning of fossil fuels grew correspondingly. Add only 10 more years, and we swelled our numbers by another 1 billion, to 7 billion people.

Our population is growing exponentially, as is our burning of fossil fuels to support that population and our economic growth. I find it hard to believe that anyone could still deny that we are having an impact on the environment given this information. Regardless, the point of this article is not to convince you of the existence of human-made climate change, but rather to indicate what your community can do to address it, and the new opportunities that will arise from it and other challenges and changes that are coming.

There are a lot of varied estimates about the carrying capacity of the Earth. The mean estimate of how many people the world can support with food tends to fall around 10 billion people. That estimate, of course, is impacted by the amount of arable land that is being paved over every day for urban growth, changes in climatic rain and drought patterns caused by ocean currents and temperatures, and a host of other factors within and beyond our control. One event could reduce that carrying capacity significantly.

Many nations are already relying extensively on food imports to feed their populations. Many global forecasters are predicting we may be as little as one generation or 20 years away from a scenario in which as few as 6 nations in the world are net food exporters. Canada is expected to be one of those, despite our current reliance on food imports. In countries such as Japan, there is a deliberate movement afoot to address the current and future challenges by creating a larger and more diverse production base. Those efforts are developing new economic opportunities in communities, new opportunities for youth, and greater security for their population.

Part of the reason for such efforts is that Japan has finite land resources; essentially, they are running out of space. Now, they are turning the tops and sunny sides of city buildings into green roofs that produce food, as well as sequester carbon dioxide and pollution. The plants help clean the air, and they

get the added benefit of urban agriculture, which has helped expand their local economies. We have no shortage of available land...yet. That might be why are so willing to continue paving over the best land in the best growing environments, and do nothing to utilize the space on our rooftops and the free energy of the sun.

There are few municipalities who would willingly weigh the value of agricultural land against the revenue to be made by a developer of a subdivision. Even fewer would consider adopting any type of aggressive urban agriculture strategy. Yet our future depends on doing even more than that. Our future depends on linking agriculture, the environment, youth, and technology together within our communities. Change is coming, whether we like it or not. Our choice is only whether we embrace the changes ahead of the curve and capitalize on those opportunities, or resist the change to our own detriment.

Agriculture has gone through its share of changes in the last century, but nothing like those about to come. These changes present both challenges and opportunities. There are now more farmers above the age of 70 than below the age of 35, and the average age continues to climb. There have been a lot of studies done looking for an explanation for the trend. I won't rehash or debate those here, but I will suggest that meaningfully engaging the next generations in agriculture will mean finding a way to align the future of the industry with the dominant values of those generations.

These next generations value technology, health, craftsmanship, and community. As farming enterprises get larger, they may adopt technology on a grand scale, but they often lose the elements of the other three. I don't mean to offend. I only mean to point out that a lot of Gen X'ers, Millennials, and the coming iGeneration aren't as inclined to be interested in grand scale primary agriculture production. It isn't that the next generation isn't interested in agriculture, they just aren't necessarily interested in doing it the way it has been done before.

They don't automatically believe bigger is better. They like eating local healthy food. They like craft beer. They like being part of a community. They like to create, and work with their hands. They like to add value to things others consider worn out and beyond repair. They value the use of technology to solve problems, and to free up their time so they don't have to work 80 hours a week and can instead really live and be part of their community. They would love agriculture if it didn't look so much like a corporate box. They don't like corporate boxes.

I know that will likely hurt some feelings, but agriculture is starting to look a lot more corporate than it used to. That is not meant to be a slight, or an insult. It simply explains why, around the continent and the world, there is growing public opposition to certain aspects of farming. For instance, we know there is widespread and growing public concern over pesticides and genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Did you know that in this country, there are people opposed to potato production, because they believe it is bad for the environment? Perhaps the public opposition to potatoes, pesticides, and GMOs has more to do with a lack of personal connection to the producer and a distrust of corporations, than it has to do with potatoes, pesticides and GMOs themselves.

Agriculture will be more interesting and more prevalent for the coming generations if they can do it on a smaller scale where they add value to the raw commodity, have the chance to use technology, and can do it in a way that is healthy, environmentally sustainable, and is a benefit to their community. They would be interested in smaller innovative farming practices that are about value-adding rather than

simply shipping raw product. As the world population grows, and our environmental issues grow with it, this is how the future will look. That may bode well for the future of your community in more ways than you can imagine.

This syndicated content is provided by Doug Griffiths, best-selling author and chief community builder at 13 Ways, a company with a mission to push communities to face their challenges to find their unique path to success. For more information visit www.13ways.ca, or we can start the conversation at info@13ways.ca.