

The Sustainable Wellington Net The Sustainable Wellington Net

The Development of an Electronic Community Network

Abstract

The Sustainable Wellington Net is an outgrowth of a wider proposal (which is still being developed) for a physical Green Centre in Wellington. The aim of this centre will be to promote and facilitate sustainable development in Wellington on an individual, community, business and governmental level.

As the realities of funding meant that the physical Green Centre was going to be a long term project, the organising committee looked at other options for promoting these aims which could be implemented in a shorter time frame. It was decided to use the communication and information sharing potential of the Internet to set up a Virtual Green Centre. Use of the Internet could fulfil many of the functions of a physical Green Centre but at a level of cost that meant it could be set up very quickly and maintained relatively easily.

Sustainable Wellington Net URL - www.sustainable.wellington.net.nz

Introduction

The Sustainable Wellington Net is part of a wider concept of a centre in Wellington to promote the aims of sustainable development - a "Green Centre".

To give you some background I will give a brief outline of the history of the concept. The main outcome of the UN "Earth Summit" held in Brazil in 1992 was the formulation of the "Agenda 21" for world development in the 21st century. Its key points involve taking a holistic approach to sustainable development - recognising the interrelationships between people, the environment and the economy. Throughout 1996 to 97 as a response to their adoption of the goals of Agenda 21, the Wellington city Council held wide-ranging public consultations on the future development of Wellington. The outcome of this process was the "Our City/Our Future " document which was a plan that gave a strategy for the future of Wellington.

Goals, targets and initiatives were outlined in "Our city/Our Future". One of the goals was to establish a "Green Centre" to promote and facilitate sustainable development in Wellington - on an individual, community, business and governmental level.

A steering committee was established to develop the idea of the Green Centre. The committee was made up of community representatives from a diverse range of backgrounds. As a first step we designed a questionnaire which was sent out to environmental, conservation and community groups in Wellington designed to gauge the level of support for the idea of a Green Centre. A further aim of the survey was to get some idea of what services and facilities these groups thought the centre should provide. The responses we received showed there was very strong support for the idea. A large number of groups indicated that there was a need for a centre that would provide information resources on environmental issues - a sort of one stop environmental shop.

Unfortunately the realities of the availability of funding in Wellington meant that the physical Green Centre was going to be a long-term project. There have been a number of environmental centres set up in NZ but only a few have survived for any length of time. It is the basic problem of having this fixed-costs-financial millstone around your collective neck. We did not want to take the step of making a commitment to a physical centre without any assured long term funding.

The organising committee then looked at other options for promoting our aims and meeting the needs that our survey had identified. It was decided to use the communication and information sharing potential of the Internet to set up a "virtual Green Centre". Use of the Internet could fulfil many of the functions of a physical Green Centre but at a level of cost which meant it could be set up very quickly and maintained relatively easily.

The first steps to the Sustainable Wellington Net

I will look at this process in two parts; firstly the initial work we did to define the framework, format and content of the SWN; secondly the selection of our networking platform.

Part One - Defining Format and Content

In setting up the SWN we felt that it was vital for us to -

- * Clearly define our community
- * Clearly identify the needs of that community

To try and resolve these points we designed a short questionnaire that looked at a number of points -whether groups had Internet access, what level of access they had, and how much they used it what services that the SWN could provide would be useful for their group (we gave a list of possible things that we could provide)

The questionnaire was sent out to all Environment/Conservation groups in the Wellington Region. The response rate was approximately 45%. The feedback we got was interesting and useful, particularly regarding the services that groups thought we should provide. The four key things that were emphasised in the responses were -

- * A directory of Wellington Environment/Conservation groups
- * Updates on current Wellington issues
- * Links to useful information
- * Community notice board

The results gave a very strong indication that groups felt the SWN could be useful to them and that they wanted a focus on local issues. Part Two - Selection of Networking Platform

I will just digress a bit at this point to give a little bit of background to our choice of webhosting platform. The WCC is in the process of setting up a Wellington Community Network, and to manage this they have set up a trust structure called the 20/20 Trust. Some of the projects which the 20/20 Trust run include a seminar programme providing info on the use of the Internet

which is aimed specifically at NGO's, PC Recycle which is a computer refurbishing scheme designed to provide computers at no or low cost to schools and NGO'S. The 20/20 Trust also manages the Wellington World Wide Web (or W4 as it is better known); this provides free website hosting for NGO's. We chose to locate the SWN on this Community Webhosting scheme. The choice of this for our base was, to be frank, based initially on the pragmatic point that it was free (given our total lack of funding this was of some significance). It has been a good choice; it has provided adequate space for growth and a nexus for basing associated community Webster. Also our vision of developing an Environment/Conservation electronic community network fitted in well with their concept of a wider Wellington community Network. The Sustainable Wellington Net would fit within this network as one of a number of "Special Interest Groups".

Setting up the SWN website

With some clear idea of our community and their needs and a secure host we then began the practical work of setting up the SWN. This developed in a number of stages. Firstly we just had the front page, Mission Statement, a directory of groups and a links page. We have progressively added new pages eg Site News, Hot Topics, Calendar Page (Green Events), Green Shopping, Ethical Investments. As well as adding pages Tom did a substantial redesign to make the page more user friendly and to ensure that it -

- * would be fast to download and not graphics intensive would display correctly and be usable by any browser (including text only ones)
- * would comply with the latest HTML specifications (HTML 4.0, CSS)
- * would be friendly to people with disabilities (the site is Bobby Approved)

The site was hand coded using BBEdit Lite on an Apple Macintosh.

Future development

A key priority for our future development is to increase the use value of the SWN to Environment and Conservation groups in Wellington - to make it something that is integral and indispensable to the work of the groups in our community. Given our limited funding a lot of the publicity for the SWN has been essentially word of mouth (or cyber word of mouth). However, we have made concerted efforts to use the local media to publicise the SWN and have taken advantage of any opportunities for networking and meeting with groups in our community. We have also produced a Green Bookmark with information about the website and the note "please bookmark this site" that we have distributed at places like Organic food shops, libraries, CAB's etc. A number of Wellington groups have sent them out with their mail outs. At the Environment and Conservation Organisations annual conference in Wellington we set up a display and an operating terminal with a cached copy of the website. This was very useful as a trial run and we hope to repeat this at future events.

Realistically this has been a slow incremental process but one which is now showing real growth in the use of the SWN by local groups, particularly the Action Alerts and the SWN Calendar. January was our first real month, the

total number of visits to for the month was 31 (to be frank probably 60% of these were Tom and I), and the average number of visits per day in August was over 7.

There are still real problems that we are facing. Part of the problems are a result of the realities of NGO's in NZ, the very large number of groups which can result in fragmentation and lack of communication. (ECO, a national umbrella organisation of Environment/Conservation groups has about 70 odd members nationally, but in Wellington alone there are approximately 65 Environment/Conservation groups). This problem can be exacerbated by a parochialism or conservatism in groups. (It was interesting in our survey that while all of the respondents had Internet access only 40% used it for their group's work). Lack of funding (that chronic problem of all NGO's) is an ongoing worry particularly for the future development of a physical Green Centre. This is further complicated by the possible uncertain future of the WCC Community Webhosting Scheme.

Notwithstanding these problems we are optimistic for the future. Mario Marino posed the question about community networks: " are they part of an ephemeral social phenomenon that is destined to merely stall or implode. Or do they represent a vibrant social force capable of adapting to a rapidly changing world and community needs, and achieving positive, lasting social change in their communities?"

We believe very strongly in the latter proposition and we hope that the SWN will develop as a major catalyst for the growth of community awareness of and participation in the sustainable development of Wellington and NZ.