

THE IN-TIME(S)

Inspired by the future,
rooted in the past, acting in
the present

Extracts based on the coming sequel to the book "Inventing for the Sustainable Planet" - the inner and outer journey to sustainability. <http://avbp.net>

Region celebrates 85% self-sufficiency

BY MAX WAHLTER

The English town of Redditch today celebrates an important milestone: its local economy has reached an 85% re-circulation, making it one the most resilient and self-sufficient local economies in the country. Having embarked on an ambitious local economy program way back at the start of the century, residents are now enjoying a good conscience, healthy living and a thriving, prosperous community.

It all started with an exhibition at the Station

Local councilor, Richard Naylor, shows me around the town as preparations are underway for the evening's street party.

"This is where it all kicked off," says Richard as he points to the car park outside the railway station. Pointing to an area in the corner he says: "we organized a special type of local business fair - where entrepreneurs offered not their goods but the opportunity to invest in their business and get the return as goods or services instead of interest."

Residents saved regularly

You saved in the bank until you reached, in the old money, 1000 which is the nominal value of one unit. Then at the exhibition you could place your unit with one of the local businesses. The money was a kind of a loan that allowed the business to expand their operation.

ABOUT THE IN-TIME(S)

We are living at the peak of human achievement, but also at the peak of our resources. Sustainable development means handing over to future generations the possibility to create for themselves a standard of living at least equivalent to that we enjoy. This requires fundamentally re-thinking how we use resources, indeed all of the social arrangements we take for granted. And we need to start now. Ideation, imagining, even fantasizing are tools we can all use in this re-thinking process. The technique used to provide the basis of these extracts, Imagestreaming, opens up endless possibilities to explore our ideal future.

Whilst the unit was with the business you would get products, product discounts, free training, all kinds of services. This not only gave the business owner capital at a lower cost than the interest rate, it also ensured a following of loyal customers, who the more they used the business, the greater their comparative savings.

A group of friends started it all

Richard takes me along to the local café where, by the way, he has a couple of units invested. I notice the menu offers all kinds of coffee drinks and that unit investors get 20% discount. He sees me looking at the menu and as if reading my thoughts says: "Yes, it gets to be a self-promoting scheme".

Judy Huntly and Jeff Watts join us. Judy and Jeff were in on the scheme from the beginning and I am interested to hear how it all started.

The situation was getting worse

"We were a group of friends who were just talking about the situation. Large companies were letting people go, local firms were being squeezed by foreign imports and at the same time it was looking as if we were headed for energy shortages. To us

what made sense was keeping the money flowing in the local area – we chose a 30 km radius after working out how far we thought we could walk in a day, maximum, if fossil fuels supplies dried up.”

Lack of capital

Judy explains that local businesses, especially those where nature did a lot of the work, needed capital to be able to transition to serving local people sustainably. In many cases, the costs and the risks were too high to attract loans normally.

On the other hand, Judy and her friends saw that local residents wanted to put their money into something sensible with people they knew.

Fed up having everyone else profit

Jeff explains “people were tired of being seen as consumers, paying for corporations to take risks with their employees’ health and the environment. They wanted to be part owners, and with every penny they spent they wanted to be promoting their own, sustainable, future”.

Judy says that they came up with the idea to combine marketing and investment that would, the more you invested, give you more of the essential services you need to live. The wild dream they had was that by the time you reached retirement age your investments would keep you with a roof over your head, food on the table and a range of things to do with others in the local community.

Of course, all this would not have been possible without the involvement of the local council and other organizations. Richard explains how the local council supported the scheme. They organized workshops and training to help local business people get into the idea that they could work in this way. And they organized the local markets and exhibitions together with residents and shopkeeper associations.

Local business takes off

Jeff himself runs a service that creates edible landscapes using container gardening. Says Jeff: “the scheme boosted my business by no end. At first I had difficulty understanding the real power behind the idea until I started to calculate how much I could make by expanding my inventory of containers”.

“People who have two units in my scheme get containers deliveries every spring filled with fresh earth. And we collect them, along with compost, every winter. Our customers pay to have them planted with different fruit and vegetables. By placing their units in our business customers save up to 50% of their food bills – and half of their trips to the food store.”

We save on earth as they save their compost for us to collect. And of course they know they need to look after the compost as it lowers the costs for “their” company and ultimately their own. Jeff explains “suddenly it makes sense for people to help lower the costs for their suppliers – because it lowers their own. The old model just put more money in the pockets of the owners.

Local bank provides solid base

We take our leave of Jeff and Judy to visit the local bank with Richard. The window of the bank looks like a real estate agents offering various houses for sale, but a closer look reveals each display is a local company offering you the opportunity to place your units with them.

Bank manager Annika Sharp greets us and takes us to her office. As we pass the counter I see a brochure stand offering more information on the units being promoted in the window. Says Annika: “As you can see, by working with units it makes it easy for residents to compare opportunities”.

What you get for your money is impressive indeed. I see a savings scheme where each unit saved goes

into securing see a savings scheme where each unit saved goes into securing you a place in a retirement flat in an eco-village – with food included! Another few units and you invest in sheep rearing (the sheep act as lawn mowers at the same time and you can rent a few for free). The unit entitles you to a deep discount on your meat and sheepskins.

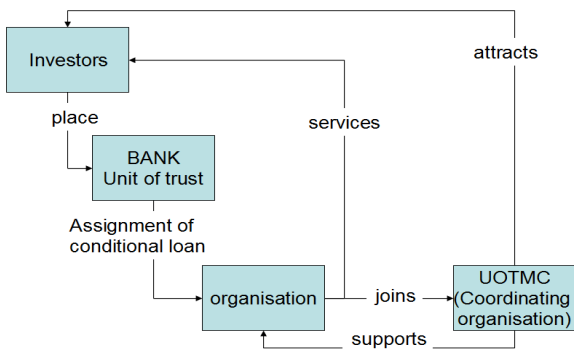
We take a seat in her office and Annika explains the Bank’s role: we set up savings accounts for unit buyers so they can get in to the habit of saving. When they reach 1000 they can invest in a unit which is unplaced as we call it. This is the bank’s own fund. We then administer the placement of a unit in one of the schemes which has to be approved by us before we approve the purchase.

Organisation	units	start	notes
savings account	1,09	2006-10--01	saved
mutton	1	2005-09--13	food & water
Eco-box	2	2006-12--20	food & water
water	2	2007-01--27	food & water
housing co-op	10	2006-05--30	accomodation
windpower	4	2007-10--14	energy

Screen from the Internet depot

We run an internet depot service so our customers can see where their units are placed. We help with swapping units for others as well.

Together with the local business association and the council we organize workshops and seminars where local business owners can get help in “unitizing” their investment offerings.



The organisations involved

Marketing is taken care of, not by the bank but a separate marketing company, called the UOTMC in the diagram.

“We even run what we call “local economy Moots” where we bring businesses together with residents to explore synergies, opportunities, visions and especially, ways to turn one organization’s waste into another’s raw materials,” says Richard. Since Jeff’s growing container scheme was introduced for example, waste collected dropped by a third as it made good sense to compost every available scrap.

How did they persuade everyone?

As we head back to join the party I find myself throwing a lot of skeptical arguments over to Councilor Richard Naylor. I can see that Jeff and Judy’s group were filled with enthusiasm from the beginning – but wining the majority of resident over seems a daunting task.

“It’s all about the stories you tell,” says Richard. “Jeff and Judy’s group pulled together local stakeholders by asking us how we saw the future going for our area. The question was: how can we best invest in the future we want?”

So the story went: in a world with declining per capita availability of oil and other materials the best investment is in things that give you not money, but give you what you need.

Richard explains that they were quick to gather examples of local investment at an early stage and use them to show that it really was possible to transform the local economy.

“And we had fun,” says Richard, as he points me to a chair by the table in the street. I get a bottle of local beer in my hand can’t help but think: “These people have got a good thing going on here!”

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