

October 2-8, 2003

Institute takes quiet approach in shaping progressive policy

by BARRY W. DUGAN - Managing Editor

An innovative policy institute is quietly training dozens of Sonoma County's political leaders, and potential leaders, to create public policy with a progressive perspective.

The Leadership Institute for Ecology & the Economy's goal is to educate public leaders to create public policy that is socially just, environmentally friendly and leads to a healthy economy and sustainable community. (Sustainability is generally defined as environmentally friendly, economically viable and socially equitable.)

For the past three years, the Leadership Institute has held a leadership training for community activists, public officials and other leaders. The nine-month course includes training in land use and water issues, economics, sustainability, growth, county history and demographics, government and activism, to name a few.

Recently, the institute hired a new president, Windsor resident Ron Sundergill, and started its fourth leadership training class. Sundergill, who held various public policy roles in the Washington, D.C. area, finds Sonoma County's political climate to his liking. "The political environment in Sonoma County is fertile ground for this kind of institute and these kinds of policies," said Sundergill. "The general population is very open to the idea of sustainability ... and public officials are too."

The class of 2003-04 includes Sebastopol City Councilmember Linda Kelley and Sebastopol Planning Commissioners Clare Najarian and Yvette Williams van Aggelen.

Past classes have included leaders from all parts of the county, including labor leaders, community activists and teachers.

Loosely modeled after the "Leadership Santa Rosa" training that is organized by that city's chamber of commerce and has a decidedly business-friendly bent, the Leadership Institute's version aims to link the environment with the economy and create public policy that includes ecology, economics and social justice.

The institute was founded by Rick Theis, a Sebastopol resident, a former Santa Rosa Planning Commissioner, city council candidate and former director of the Sonoma County Grape Growers Association. Theis went through the Leadership Santa Rosa course in the 1980s and afterward remembers speaking about it with Dick Day and Bill Kortum, two elders of the county's environmental movement.

"They said 'Why isn't there anything like this for environmentalists?' That stuck in my mind," said Theis.

Several years later, Theis and his wife, Carolyn Johnson, starting asking themselves, "How can we do this? How can we make this happen? Then we said, 'We can do this, we can make this happen.'"

So Theis cashed in his Coca Cola stock (which he bought during his brief employment with the soda pop giant) and founded the institute. Theis said the model for the institute came not only from Leadership Santa Rosa but in part from the Environmental Forum of Marin. "But we wanted to be more than that," he said. "We wanted to bring in social equity, which leads to a focus on creating public policy for sustainable futures."

Theis has seen direct results. Two graduates of a past class were members of the Cloverdale Planning Commission. Their involvement, he believes, led to the city approving "the most progressive inclusionary housing element in Sonoma County." Inclusionary housing requires developers to include a percentage of affordable housing units in all residential projects. "It makes a difference," he said.

New president Ron Sundergill brings an extensive background in public policy development at the local and national levels to the institute. He was the Washington Representative for Energy at the Union of Concerned Scientists, director of Legislation at the Maryland Department of Human Resources, president of the Board of County Commissioners in Frederick County, Maryland, and held posts with the Sierra Club and the U.S. Catholic Conference.

"He's fabulous," said Theis. "When I met him I said, 'we have to get this guy on board.'"

Sundergill came aboard in July and has been rapidly acquainting himself with local elected leaders and the critical issues facing Sonoma County. He has a goal of meeting every elected official in the county by the end of the year. His job is to run the leadership training, educate the county's elected and appointed officials, and raise funds for the non-profit organization.

"The experience I have in government is very important for an organization like this," said Sundergill, during an interview in the Leadership Institute's office in downtown Santa Rosa. "We're interested in training leaders, and potential leaders, and helping them understand and implement public policy that takes into account sustainability, economics, the environment, as well as social equality."

During the leadership training, a variety of speakers are brought in from various agencies and organizations. "When you go through the class you get to know who the different people are in the water agency or the board of public utilities," said Una Glass, a graduate of the 2002-03 training class. "You learn who makes the policies and who are the people you need to contact or where you have to go to a meeting to fix the problems."

Glass, a Sebastopol resident who works as an aide to county Supervisor Mike Reilly, said the leadership class was a worthwhile exercise. "I thought it was a great class. One of the really great things I got out of it was there was tons of information. The other thing was the networking. Talking to and being with a group of people that are involved in the public process ... it was great to hear all those different perspectives. It was this kind of interactive forum to talk with people who could bring a lot of information to the mix."

Sundergill, who is part of this year's leadership training, believes the process has been effective. "The people who go through the program are much more effective and

knowledgeable about the issues," he said. "They go back to the organization they are already involved in and they are more effective because they have a broad-brush background in a lot of these important issues."

More information about the Leadership Institute for Ecology & the Economy is available at www.ecoleader.org.

Copyright © 2003 Sonoma West Publishers