



THE THREE “E”S

By Richard Paul Hinkle

Rick Theis' Leadership Institute strives to create a more sustainable community.

Rick Theis and Tanya Narath of the Leadership Institute for Ecology and the Economy
[Duncan Garrett Photography]

ECONOMY • ENVIRONMENT • EQUITY

The November election has reformed the way many of us think, but some seem to have been working well ahead of the curve. The Leadership Institute for Ecology and the Economy has been a growing part of the Sonoma County landscape since 2000. “Our organization is designed to inspire leaders to create public policy that’s environmentally friendly and socially equitable for a healthy economy and a sustainable community,” says founder and board chairman Rick Theis (pronounce it “tice”), who formerly did public relations (Wine Institute, Coca Cola).

“Our flagship program is called ‘Leadership Training for a Sustainable Future.’ Every year, the Institute selects about three dozen community leaders and activists who have shown an interest in knowing more about how we can create a more sustainable community. They’re brought together for a retreat, then continue to meet one day a month for nine months to examine issues under what we see as the three ‘E’s of sustainability: the economy; the environment; and a sense of equity, or justice. We bring in community leaders and experts to address the class and participate in panel discussions.”

Theis lists the discussion topics crisply: principles of sustainability, food systems, ecosystem services (including water sources and uses, energy and waste management), health and education, business and economy, smart development (linking transportation and land use; building, community planning and design), and overall leadership as it can be applied in all of those areas.

Eyes wide open

“The format is similar to leadership training programs held in cities all across our country,” adds CEO Tanya Narath, a former Hewlett-Packard/Agilent engineer who’s been on board since spring 2005. “What makes us different—what makes us distinctive from many of those programs—is they focus on understanding the system and how to get involved. What we do that’s unique, I think, is we’re issue- and policy-oriented. We dig in and look at issues, try to examine how policy affects them and determine what the balance is between our three E’s of sustainability.”

Born and raised in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Narath attended New Mexico State for a couple of years, then transferred to the University of New Mexico to take her bachelor’s in electrical engineering in 1986.

“Perfect timing,” she says with an ironic laugh. “Big downturn in the technologies field. So I went on to the University of Texas at Austin to get my MBA. There, I was recruited by Hewlett-Packard, which was exactly where I wanted to go. I knew about the great reputation it had throughout the engineering community, and I’d heard about its superior corporate

Kudos By Richard Paul Hinkle



The long-time proprietor of Sawyer’s News in downtown Santa Rosa, **John Sawyer** has been a strong and dedicated player in local politics. Presently on Santa Rosa’s city council (and its past mayor), Sawyer is also a graduate-fellow of the Institute. “Taking the classes was such a fulfilling experience,” he says. “I know of *no better* way to quickly gather so much vital, quality information about how a city works, with an ecological spin...and have a great time doing it! There’s a serious paradigm shift going on now. The whole notion of ‘green building’ is being embraced by people and governments. Taking the class was life-altering in the way a trip to Europe is to a young person: It wholly changes the way you examine the decisions you make.”



Steve Rabinowitsh, an instructor in Santa Rosa Junior College’s Social Science department for 17 years, was a founding board member of the Institute. “The primary function of the seminars is to train community leaders and give them a broad viewpoint on the hard decisions they inevitably face,” says the Los Angeles native, who has Masters degrees in political science and urban planning from the University of Colorado. “The Institute brings diverse people together, people who are going to become members of boards and city councils, and leaders in their community. Their diversity of class members helps to broaden everyone’s perspectives. The aim is to be wholly nonpartisan and to help people put together all aspects of society and environment: social equity, the environment and the economy. It’s really rewarding to see how people grow from the program and become leaders.”

culture. What I didn't know was what a paradise Sonoma County was. Moving here was all of my dreams coming true—and then some.”

After 17 years with Hewlett-Packard and Agilent—she started in computer systems, development and support, then moved into management—she was ready for a change. “I was already starting to get itchy when my husband and I took a backpacking trip to Alaska in 1994. I grew up camping and backpacking, and this trip really reinforced my awareness of the impact we humans can make on our environment. Up there, we were in places where there were no trails, no street signs and no people for miles and miles. It made me hyper-aware of an inner need to do something to preserve wildlife refuges, or

“Consider the many impacts of having decent housing close to where you work, play and shop.”

—Tanya Narath, Leadership Institute

something akin to that, in the urban sector.”

Time and ferment brought her into contact with a brochure for the Leadership Institute. She applied for the program...and was denied. “It’s a pretty competitive program, and I was crushed by the denial of my application,” she says. “Then I got a phone call at work. Someone had dropped out, there was a position open, and I was number one on the waiting list. My enthusiasm was rekindled, and I took part in the fall 2004 seminars.

“I was amazed at the depth and diversity of the people taking the training, and felt a little out of place as a corporate-techie type surrounded by all these people who were already deeply involved in a range of social and environmental programs. I remember, especially, visiting the Benziger Winery and learning about all the agricultural aspects of sustainability and the issues surrounding workers and their housing. The societal impact of those jobs, and how nearly invisible these people were, was quite eye-opening.”

Narath suggests the proximity of affordable housing to one’s place of work is a key issue at the Institute. “Consider the many impacts of having decent housing close to where you work, play and shop. We accept that most people will have to drive some distance to where they work until they can afford a closer place to live. Many people working in San Francisco drive to Marin. Many Marin workers commute from Sonoma County. And more and more of those who work in Santa Rosa are living in Mendocino and Lake counties. The problem with this is, we’re only looking at the cost of housing in relation to income. If the rent or mortgage payment is less than 30 percent of our income, we call that *affordable*. What we fail to take into account is the cost of transportation.

“Often, public transportation is so inadequate it means traveling by single-occupant vehicle, the most polluting way possible to move from one point to another. It reduces air quality and has a measurable negative impact on the health of the entire community. It also means less time the worker has to spend with kids, helping them with homework or just being there to be a good parent. In the end, this can result in poorer academic performance in school now and lost economic opportunity for that child in the future. It might even lead to gang activity, with the resulting crime and vandalism that have a further negative impact on all taxpayers. Not to mention the added stress on the worker’s life and his or her reduced productivity.”

She says fully half of the carbon footprint of someone living in the North Bay is directly attributable to transportation issues (and that’s about 11 *tons* of carbon each year). “Just taking public transportation can reduce that carbon footprint to nine tons per year. Even more so, if one lives in a vibrant, high-density community—where one is able to walk or bike to work, shopping, attend school or plays—one could further reduce that carbon imprint to just *two* tons per year! Consider just how much healthier that would be for all of us. Obesity would be reduced or eliminated, cardiac health would be much improved, and the planet would benefit.”

The big picture

Improving the planet is what the idealistic Theis is all about. Growing up in Minneapolis, he was completely and utterly fascinated by politics. “My dad, even though he was a Republican, was a very close friend of Eugene McCarthy—they played ice hockey together—and whenever we visited Washington, D.C., we’d be seated in the Senate’s ‘family box,’” recalls Theis, the warm afterglow obvious in his voice.

“I got my undergraduate degree in political science—I like to know how things work—from the University of Minnesota in 1968, but there weren’t a whole lot of job opportunities in the field at the time, so I went on to take an MS in information media at St. Cloud State. One of my courses was in television production and, for the lab, I volunteered at the local public television station. I loved it. I went on to work five years producing educational programs at the University of Minnesota. It was the most fun!” Which means it didn’t pay much, right? “A bit more than \$7,000 a year.”

Which is where wine enters the story. (Wine is what precipitates Rick’s move West, as you shall see.) “In 1971, I had started a little wine tasting group, which essentially meant five of us would get together for a meal and wine every Monday evening. By 1972, I was writing a little newsletter for the wine shop where we bought the wines for our group. Through that, I got to know the publisher of the *Minneapolis Star & Tribune*, who was a

real wine nut and wrote the paper's wine column. When he died suddenly, the food editor asked me to take over his column.

"One day, the California Wine Institute came to town to do a presentation, and took me out to dinner afterward. They told me I was one of just eight paid wine columnists in the country. It was a great dinner, especially when they told me one of their public relations people had just quit two days before...and offered me the job. What an opportunity!"

These notes he worked for the Wine Institute in San Francisco for a year and 10 months (note the precision) before a recruiter contacted him about a job with Coca Cola, which had taken a major position in the American wine industry. "Again, it was an opportunity, and we looked upon the idea of living in Atlanta as an adventure," he says. "It's possible that I got the job because they were having a hard time finding wine writers who wanted to live in Atlanta! In any case, my then-wife Pat put a limit on the excursion: four years. Turned out, we were there two years, four months and 18 days."

Because? "When Seagram and Sons bought Coke out of the business, we were all fired! So, in 1984, we came back to California, settling in Santa Rosa, where I did freelance work for 18 wineries and the Sonoma County Grape Growers Association. That gradually morphed into a nearly full-time job with the latter group. When I retired, I was the director of the Grape Growers Association and the Meritage Association [a group that promotes red and white Bordeaux-modeled blends]. My wife Carolyn and I had invested judiciously, and when she asked what I wanted to do with the rest of my life, I knew the answer."

Give the world a Coke

While working to promote the benefits of wine, he'd gradually taken a keen interest in sustainable practices, as applied to agriculture, the ecology, the economy and

that basic sense of justice that drives many of us to become activists. Having served on the board for the Berkeley-based Urban Ecology and undertaken Leadership Santa Rosa's seminar, he saw the need for something a bit more broad, something that linked together the vital facets of economy, environment and equity.

"I had some Coca Cola stock that had grown in value substantially, and I thought, 'How ironic that I can make use of the fruits of this corporate icon to help reframe the debate,'" he says with a merry wink of an eye. "I had enough to pay an executive director and rent offices for our first two years."

That was eight years ago, and the Institute has grown and expanded solidly into a new era of thinking through its striking successes. "Many of our graduates are counted as members of city councils and planning commissions throughout the county," Theis says with pride. "Obama's election doesn't hurt. I see a shift toward our being more willing to invest in infrastructure again, in building green, in looking more toward renewable energy sources.

"I believe our children will have a better future because these people have a greater awareness of the interplay of issues and will look to create a better balance between the naturally competing interests that are out there. You can see that with the Accountable Development Coalition, which works with developers to negotiate for green building, affordable housing and living wages for their workers in return for an easier slog through the planning process. Above all, everyone will be far more attuned to the underlying currents of the economy, our ecological environment, and the need for social justice that gives legitimacy to all our actions." ■

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