



Sustainable Development in West Virginia:

Economic opportunities, healthy environments and
improved quality of life – now and in the future

**A whitepaper prepared by the
Vision Shared
Sustainable Development Team**

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Sustainable Development in West Virginia

1. Introduction

One of the great challenges facing the citizens of West Virginia is planning the future growth of the state's economy while maintaining the highest quality of life possible. Economic growth, quality of life and environmental values often have been viewed as conflicting, yet many West Virginians understand that choices between good jobs, strong communities and a healthy environment are not exclusive. They can enjoy all three.

These challenges are not West Virginia's alone. Governments, businesses and communities all over the world are recognizing that environmental, economic and social issues must be addressed, valued and planned for in all future development. The stakes are high. The legacy that remains will affect the quality of life for all future generations.

Addressing all of these issues in planning commonly is referred to as "sustainable development." The concept of sustainability represents a way to think systematically and to find long-term solutions to the problems we face in our communities, our economy and our environment.

The idea of sustainability must be integrated into all economic development strategies in West Virginia. A small but growing number of thought leaders have recognized the value created by applying sustainability principles to the state's most critical needs: creating good jobs, building strong communities and having a clean and safe environment.

Recognizing both the challenge and opportunity of sustainable development, the leadership of Vision Shared Inc. in August 2006 created a team to develop a blueprint for sustainability in West Virginia. This white paper is the first step toward providing a foundation for advancing the concept of sustainable development in West Virginia. It is intended to:

- Describe sustainable development in clear and understandable terms;
- Discuss its potential application in West Virginia; and
- Identify strategies for encouraging consideration of sustainability principles in decisions affecting the state's growth and development.

2. What is sustainability and sustainable development?

"Sustainability" is the principle of ensuring that our actions today do not limit the range of economic, social and environmental options available to future generations.

"Sustainable development" refers to development that enhances economic opportunity and community well-being while protecting and restoring the natural environment upon which people and economies depend. Development that destroys or pollutes the environment often results in communities that quickly decay and leaves limited economic options for future generations.

For human activities to be sustainable over time, they should:

- Meet people's economic, environmental and social needs;
- Use renewable resources at a rate that can be maintained over time;

- Reduce reliance on nonrenewable resources;
- Reduce reliance on and limit the release of toxic substances that do not break down readily in nature;
- Use all resources as efficiently and fairly as possible so that present and future generations can meet their needs;
- Use land in ways that meet diverse needs, conserve financial and natural resources and preserve the land's use for future generations;
- Reflect the interdependence of social, economic and environmental conditions; and
- Preserve the integrity of ecological processes and biological diversity.

Economic development and environmental quality often have been seen as involving mutually exclusive goals. Historically, some economic development has been detrimental to the environment, and some environmental arguments have ignored the needs of West Virginians to make a living. Sustainable development makes human development activities compatible with the environment by identifying and developing solutions that enhance both goals.

People unfamiliar with the concept of sustainable development may perceive it as a purely environmental program intended to slow or halt development. That is not the case. Sustainable development is about balance and using common sense in development. Sustainable development is about creating a business climate where better goods and services are produced with less energy, and materials are produced with less waste and pollution. It is about communities planning with a broader vision for the future by considering the social, economic and environmental needs of its citizens. And it is about deciding how basic human needs such as health care, education and income can be met in a system that is economically and environmentally sustainable.

“Without a healthy economy, unemployment is high, leading to a host of social problems; and without a healthy economy, governments don't have the revenues to handle these increased social ills. Without a healthy environment, we deplete the resources upon which our community depends and contribute to human illness. Without a vibrant community, we don't have the employees to work in business, and people in crisis don't have the luxury of being concerned about environmental degradation.”

Business Guide to Sustainability
Earthscan Publishing, 2006

Sustainability challenges us to make decisions that simultaneously improve the economy, the community and the environment. When the concept of sustainability becomes part of the dialogue for economic development, we are forced to recognize the links and trade-offs between the underlying issues, rather than dealing with them independently. When we don't

discuss or understand the relationships between development and the environment, we often make poor policy choices.

Practical application of the concept is often complex and challenging. The economic, social and environmental dimensions of an activity are seldom in balance; local needs and circumstances lead to tradeoffs. A community dialogue based on sustainability can help resolve contentious development issues by focusing the debate on what is best for the community as a whole. Tools such as evaluation criteria and performance metrics can help ensure appropriate consideration of sustainability principles, regardless of the issue being addressed. These tools may be utilized by public officials, government agencies, businesses, nongovernmental organizations and any other group whose actions may affect the economy, the environment or the community.

3. What is the status of sustainable development in West Virginia?

In West Virginia, leadership for sustainable development has emerged through initiatives of the state Department of Environmental Protection; through Vision Shared Inc., a nonprofit organization promoting a comprehensive economic development strategy for the state; and through the individual efforts of businesses, communities and foundations and other nongovernmental organizations.

West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection

The West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) is the state agency responsible for implementing environmental laws passed by the West Virginia Legislature and for implementing major federal programs dealing with air and water quality, waste management and mining regulation.

In February 2005, DEP released the results of a year-long study called the “Sustainability Assessment” to evaluate the potential for sustainable development as a tool to drive environmental improvement in the state. Funded by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Environmental Council of States, the report examined current activities in the state that demonstrated sustainability principles, identified opportunities and challenges to sustainable development and offered a strategy for advancing sustainable development in West Virginia. While not officially endorsed by DEP, the report’s recommendations served to stimulate discussion on the subject and provide a platform for pursuing sustainability initiatives by state agencies and others.

Based on this assessment DEP has initiated several programs, many in collaboration with other agencies and organizations, to encourage sustainable development across a variety of sectors of West Virginia society. These include:

- **Brownfields** — support, technical assistance, and oversight to communities desiring to clean up and redevelop contaminated abandoned and underutilized properties. This program is managed by DEP in collaboration with two Brownfields Assistance Centers at West Virginia University and Marshall University.
- **Energy Efficiency Program** — assistance from the DEP Division of Air Quality on energy efficient practices and products for the home, workplace and while driving.

- ***Environmental Excellence*** — a program to encourage, promote, recognize and reward superior environmental performance and enhanced public involvement of West Virginia businesses; consistent with comparable leadership programs managed by EPA.
- ***Environmental Management System Assistance*** — training and assistance to help organizations integrate environmental responsibilities and practices into an overall management system to increase efficiencies and reduce environmental impacts.
- ***Highlands Action Program*** — a regional partnership of the states of West Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania and Virginia to restore and preserve the ecological and cultural resources of the Mid-Atlantic Appalachian Highlands.
- ***Rehabilitation Environmental Action Plan (REAP)*** — a legislatively-directed effort to provide a more effective and streamlined system of environmental remediation programs such as litter removal, recycling and open dump cleanups, with oversight by DEP and the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources.
- ***Smart Growth*** — training and assistance for local governments and others interested in applying the principles of Smart Growth to their community development efforts to maximize the benefits and minimize the impacts of development decisions.
- ***Sustainable Campus Initiative*** — training and assistance to help West Virginia's higher education institutions manage operations and future growth to improve efficiency and minimize environmental impacts.
- ***Sustainable Communities Initiative*** — on-the-ground assistance to conduct free energy, water and waste assessments in select communities of need, to help homeowners, businesses, schools and other community institutions save money and lessen environmental impacts. Currently working in Braxton, Fayette, Gilmer, Greenbrier, Nicholas and Raleigh counties.
- ***Sustainable Health Care Initiative*** — training and resources to reduce the environmental footprint of the state's health care sector and reward hospitals for top environmental performance.
- ***Travel Green Initiative*** — a voluntary program that reviews, certifies and recognizes state travel and tourism organizations that have made a commitment to continually improve their operations to reduce environmental impacts.
- ***United States Mayors Climate Protection Agreement*** — technical assistance to West Virginia cities and towns desiring to join the Mayors Climate Protection Agreement to reduce their contribution to global warming. The cities of Fayetteville, Morgantown, Oak Hill and Shepherdstown have signed the agreement.
- ***West Virginia Environmental Education Association*** — a coordinated effort by the Oglebay Institute (Wheeling), EPA and DEP to expand and improve the quality of environmental education programs and professional development through educator training programs, information sharing and environmental training needs assessment.

Vision Shared Inc.

Since its inception in 2000, Vision Shared has focused on many of the elements inherent in sustainability: strengthening human capital, diversifying the economy, increasing individual wealth, improving governance and building public-private collaboration.

The 2005 DEP Sustainability Assessment report encouraged Vision Shared to lead the state in promoting sustainable development. Responding to this recommendation, the Vision Shared Board of Directors established a work team in August 2006 to develop recommendations on how sustainability principles should be integrated into state economic development efforts. The Sustainable Development Team includes individuals from across the state representing business, government and public interest groups.

The focus of the team's work is sustainable development defined as "seeking to live and prosper in a manner that respects the critical natural, cultural and ecological resources of West Virginia to ensure an equitable and healthy future." Major goals include encouraging conversations about sustainability, developing tools for organizations to incorporate sustainable thinking into their activities and preparing recommendations for Vision Shared on how to best advance sustainable development in the state.

Through these efforts, Vision Shared seeks to create a future in which:

- Sustainability principles are understood, accepted and applied across the state;
- Organizations, businesses, government and individuals integrate sustainability principles into their activities; and
- Leaders at the highest levels of business, government and nonprofits advocate and promote sustainable development.

Other Initiatives

In addition to the statewide leadership of DEP and Vision Shared, a number of other efforts that demonstrate the principles of sustainability are being undertaken by local, regional and state organizations. These initiatives have the potential to make a real difference in areas affected by the programs. Equally important, they highlight the need for local leadership and collaborative partnerships in guiding state development.

A partial listing of the sustainability initiatives identified by the Vision Shared Sustainable Development Team includes:

- ***Energy Opportunities Plan*** — a strategic and management initiative of the West Virginia Division of Energy to identify ways to achieve greater economic, environmental and social benefits through energy development and use.
- ***Blueprint Communities*** — an initiative led by the Federal Home Loan Bank Board to serve as a catalyst to revitalize older communities and neighborhoods, by fostering strong leadership and collaboration, focusing on planning and goal-setting strategies and building local capacity to sustain community growth. Ten West Virginia communities recently were selected to receive assistance through this program: Ansted, Fairmont-Southside, Gilmer County, McDowell County, Mullens, Ritchie County, St. Albans, Salem, Shinnston and Williamson.
- ***Conservation Funding Initiative*** — a collaborative effort of state land conservation

groups, hunting and fishing groups and farmland protection groups to secure sustainable funding for protection of important natural areas in West Virginia.

- **Cultural Heritage Tourism** — programs managed by the Preservation Alliance of West Virginia and the West Virginia Main Street Program and funded by the Benedum Foundation and others to help communities build on their local assets for tourism and other community development goals.
- **Green Business Network** — a supply-and-demand network of environmentally sustainable, locally-owned businesses that create positive social, environmental and economic impact on local economies; designed, managed and facilitated by the nonprofit Center for Economic Options in Charleston.
- **Natural Capital Investment Fund** — a certified Community Development Financial Institution providing debt and equity financing to small and emerging natural resource-based businesses that will advance sustainable economic development in economically distressed rural communities throughout North Carolina, northeast Tennessee, southwest Virginia and West Virginia.
- **Sustainable Kanawha Valley Initiative** — an investment fund created by 13 local funders to provide support for projects in Kanawha and Putnam counties that simultaneously achieve economic, environmental and social goals. The fund's three broad issue areas are community education and participation, human dignity/human services and open space and land use. The Initiative is facilitated by The Greater Kanawha Valley Foundation.
- **Tamarack Foundation** — programs supported by the Benedum Foundation and others to help West Virginia artisans grow their business and professional skills so they may build their businesses, thereby helping sustain their heritage and specialized skills.
- **West Virginia Environmental Institute** — a nonprofit organization that holds an annual conference to promote dialogue on environmental issues important to the state's economy, communities, and quality of life.

4. What are the opportunities and challenges for sustainable development?

Sustainability offers a new way of thinking about many of the current policy decisions facing the state.

How do we:

- Identify and pursue job creating activities most appropriate for West Virginia?
- Develop and use energy?
- Use our natural assets, and what we do to protect and improve environmental quality?
- Organize and manage the places where we live and work?
- Engage citizens in decisions about their future, and how we work to resolve conflicts?

Engaging in public dialogue centered on the concept of sustainable development could have a significant impact on the following issues:

- Creating and maintaining a quality of life that encourages creative, vibrant and prosperous communities;
- Building critical infrastructure such as transportation, water and sewer and utilities;
- Strengthening the state tourism industry and identifying a responsible tourism model;
- Determining an appropriate role for coal in West Virginia's future;
- Reducing pollution and creating economic opportunity through development of alternative energy sources;
- Reducing waste and promoting creative use of waste materials;
- Protecting our natural assets that will increasingly grow in demand by others;
- Strengthening local sustainable agriculture and local food systems;
- Increasing conservation of special lands in concert with appropriate land development;
- Developing balanced discourse mechanisms for controversial development activities;
- Reducing energy costs through more efficient design of new buildings and renovation of existing structures; and
- Increasing efficiencies in industrial processes.

Given the benefits that sustainable development offers, the question is: "How can we maximize its potential?" The DEP Sustainability Assessment identified several barriers to sustainability in West Virginia that must be considered:

- A history of exploitation of natural and human resources;
- Economic concerns such as low personal income, a perceived unfriendly business climate and land ownership dominated by corporate holdings;
- Lack of knowledge about local sustainability initiatives; and
- A cultural ethos based on resistance to change, lack of a global perspective on issues and denial about the impacts of current development thinking.

The Sustainability Assessment also offered suggestions for what is needed to make sustainability an integral part of West Virginia's economic development strategy:

- A greater understanding of sustainability principles;
- Leadership at the state and local level to promote sustainable development;
- Tools and other resources to assist government agencies, businesses and other organizations to incorporate sustainable development principles into their decision-making processes; and
- Metrics to set benchmarks, establish goals and measure progress.

5. Recommendations for the future

The Vision Shared Sustainable Development Team believes state and local leaders need to initiate immediate, deliberate and focused action to achieve the benefits of sustainable development. Specific actions to be considered include:

- Provide a broad range of opportunities for learning about sustainable development concepts and practices;
- Support existing sustainable development initiatives in the state;
- Provide tools for building sustainability principles into organizational policies and procedures;
- Provide incentives for businesses interested in developing and adopting sustainable practices and technologies;

- Examine the role of fiscal policy in encouraging sustainable development and initiate necessary steps for improvement;
- Ensure that community-based planning is a success and promote community development efforts that contribute to sustainability;
- Establish new public-private institutions outside of government to aid in facilitating sustainable development in the state;
- Measure, reward and publicize initiatives that contribute to the state's long-term sustainability; and
- Encourage state and local government to set an example of sustainability in their own operations and functions.

6. A Call to Action

This paper has been developed to promote a dialogue on the subject of sustainable development, and to encourage the integration of sustainability principles into the state's economic development efforts. In presenting the paper, the Vision Shared Sustainable Development Team acknowledges the essential role that all sectors of West Virginia society play in determining the state's future. We particularly recognize the role of public officials, government agencies, business leaders and nonprofit organizations in leading this timely initiative.

Our intent is that the concepts and ideas presented here will lead to further in-depth examination of sustainable development by Vision Shared and others and expedient commitment to begin the transformation of our state. Toward that end, the Sustainable Development Team will use the paper as a conceptual foundation for specific action items in the coming year.

Readers are encouraged to send comments, suggestions and information on other sustainability projects in the state to the team at gregory.e.adolfson@wv.gov.