

Summary of TONA General Meeting on Stuff, Recycling, and Greening Our Homes

Neighbors attending the TONA meeting on January 24, 2008, were treated to a viewing of the short film “The Story of Stuff,” produced and narrated by Annie Leonard, which informed us in entertaining and highly informative ways about the sources, effects, and implications of our consumer-driven society and how we can make changes to preserve and protect the world for the future. (For other business at the meeting, see separate summary.)

Leonard spent ten years tracking garbage around the world and publicizing what was happening. Then people urged her to make a film about it. Anyone who missed the meeting can view the film online at www.storyofstuff.com (and even order a CD). This really cool documentary brings together an extraordinary amount of information on how production, distribution, consumption, and disposal work and don't work. It will make you laugh, cry, and think.

Following the film, Mark Gorrell, TONA board member, TONA newsletter “layoutist,” architect, and board member of the Ecology Center, moderated a discussion and Q&A with the audience about ways to reduce the negative impacts of our consumerism. Here are some of the points discussed.

The Consumer Economy

One speaker noted that, to counter the looming (or already here) economic downturn, the government is discussing giving taxpayers a rebate and urging them to go shopping. The film gave audience members good reason to think that there might be better ways to stimulate the economy (such as public works jobs) and keep our planet livable.

Another neighbor suggested revisiting the old-time practices of saving and reusing materials at home—keeping a rag bag and putting old buttons in a button box for reuse, for example.

An audience member reminded us that producing meat is energy intensive.

Another person warned about the current craze for ethanol made from corn. Monoculture of corn depletes farmland and is being pushed by agribusiness giants such as Monsanto for profits on the fertilizers and genetically modified, patented seeds the company produces.

Another neighbor urged that residents who do make large purchases, such as autos, try to make them in Berkeley, so that we benefit from the sales tax on these goods.

The Zero Waste Goal

One neighbor noted that zero waste is the city's goal. Mark Gorrell said that the city is currently recycling 65 percent of its waste. The neighbor suggested that we use cloth grocery bags, reduce the amount of stuff we buy, and, when we do use plastic bags, reuse them.

Another person now uses the Internet to transmit business documents (converted into PDF files in Adobe Acrobat). This saves paper, FedEx charges, and transportation energy use as well as accomplishing the job more quickly. Also networking several computers allowed him to use one monitor, one keyboard, and one mouse instead of several,

A builder in the audience noted that, if you really want to remodel in a green way, you won't remodel at all—that uses the least energy.

Another speaker noted that repair can often be an excellent alternative to throwing away old products and buying new ones. He recently had his television set fixed, and the repair person noted that it was sturdier and better made than newer models.

Mark fielded a number of questions about recycling:

- The city's Recycling Center on Gilman at Second takes **compact fluorescent light bulbs** (CFLs), and the recycler does remove the mercury from them.
- **Old computers** and various other electronic and electrical equipment (**printers, TVs, VCRs, microwaves**, etc.) really do get recycled by the Alameda County Community Resource Center (ACCRC) [1501 Eastshore Highway, Berkeley 94710, www.accrc.org], which donates usable equipment to schools, other nonprofits, and needy individuals. It repairs any equipment it can, for donation. Unfixable equipment is taken apart to separate and recover the materials in ecofriendly ways, so that as little waste as possible ends up in the landfill (and none is shipped to China). You can even call (528-4755) for a pickup. ACCRC employs ex-prisoners, providing jobs that so many of these people need in order to become productive, law-abiding members of society. The organization does not take large appliances such as refrigerators and washing machines.
- For information on where to recycle **butane tanks** and **fire extinguishers**, call the Ecology Center or Alameda County Waste Management. An audience member thought Wilderness Exchange might take butane tanks.

Transportation

About one-third of a household's energy use is for transportation, one audience member noted. An electric car not only uses much less energy but also requires almost no service (other than changing the battery, changing the tires, and

lubricating from time to time). And the city of Berkeley offers free parking at its garages for electric vehicles.

A neighbor who visited England was struck by the fact that everyone walked a lot instead of driving or even taking public transit. Gas there costs about \$7 per gallon. Lowestoft, England, has become a major recycling center, partly because its former main industry, fishing in the North Sea, was destroyed by overfishing.

One speaker lauded the joys of walking to local shops on Solano Avenue. This offers exercise, no parking problems, and goods and services we need close to home. Another speaker put in a word for bicycling around town to do shopping and errands. It, too, provides exercise and eliminates parking problems. Bike baskets allow you to transport shopping items.

Paper

Paper manufacturers such as Gray's Harbor now make paper with 100 percent post-consumer waste (PCW) content—the highest level of recycled paper—that look good and print well on computer printers and copiers. The University of California buys 30 percent PCW recycled paper and could be pressured to increase the percentage. The Ecology Center on San Pablo Avenue at Blake Street sells 100 percent PCW, as does Xpedex Paper Store at 7th and Potter Streets (one block north of Ashby Avenue).

Other audience suggestions were to print on the unused side of paper whenever possible and to print documents two-sided.

A speaker asked what to do with all the catalogs she received. Mark noted that there is a website where people can opt out of catalog mailings. [To get more information about several websites on this issue, go to <http://environment.about.com/od/greenlivingdesign/a/junkmail.htm>.]

Curbside Recycling

Mark explained that currently the cans and bottles that we put out for recycling in blue bins are separated at the Berkeley Recycling Center so that they can be sold for the highest rates.

Plastic bottles now are separated into #1 types, which are shipped to Shanghai, and #2 types, which are shipped to Connecticut, where they are processed into industrial-strength carpet. The best solution is to avoid buying products packaged in plastic whenever you can.

The city is purchasing new divided recycling bins for Berkeley households. They will have two flip-up lids. One side of the bin will be for cans and bottles; the other for “fibers”—mixed paper and newspaper. We will continue to collect food waste and food-soiled paper in the little green household cans and empty them into the garden waste bins for collection.

A neighbor asked about the instruction to put newspapers to be recycled into a paper bag. She noted that she uses so few paper bags now that she found herself “stealing” paper bags from her daughter’s home out of town to use for her newspapers. Mark said that newspapers can be tied with string instead or even put loose on top of mixed paper or cans and bottles.

One audience member has reduced her use of plastic bottles by using a sparkling-water siphon, which makes about 40 gallons of the fizzy stuff one bottle or glass at a time, in her own reusable bottle .

Solar Panels

Last year a large majority of Berkeley voters approved local Measure D, which aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the city by 80 percent by 2050. City employees are in charge of implementing the measure. One plan is to bring solar energy to all Berkeley schools. Another is to start a program to finance solar power installations for individual homes and businesses; the costs will be paid back to the city by the owners in monthly payments that are lower than normal PG&E bills.

At least one member of the audience has installed enough solar panels to supply his household’s electricity needs. An economic analysis found, he said, that if you stay in a solar-powered house for ten years or more, the energy costs (PG&E) you save will equal the outlay and interest you paid for installation. Sun Light and Power was mentioned as a local source of photovoltaic equipment.

Water Use

A neighbor who replaced her hot water heater with a tankless (on-demand) model has seen a 40 percent saving on her gas bill and no shortage of hot water supply, even though she bought the smallest model. Tankless models cost around \$1,700 or \$1,800 (including installation), compared to around \$500 for a conventional tank model. Another advantage : she gained a closet space formerly occupied by the heater tank.

Toilets are now available that have two flush levels, a low-water flush and a very low-water flush, depending on the amount of waste to be flushed.

Some Berkeleyans save gray water (from baths, showers, and clothes washing) to use for flushing toilets with a bucket. Use of gray water was promoted during the drought several years ago, and some folks just continued to use it even when rainfall improved.

Government’s Role

One speaker urged that we not see government as the enemy. For matters of reducing our energy use, reducing greenhouse gases, and protecting the

environment, we need government to play a role. The elephant in the room, he said, was developing countries with increasing energy needs.

Thanks to Mark Gorrell for handling the Q&A and to all the neighbors who shared their experiences and information in this lively and interesting meeting.

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TONA Secretary