

STRENGTHENING THE ABILITY OF DELMARVA'S COMMUNITIES TO DO WELL. BUILDING A REGIONAL VISION FOR SUSTAINABILITY.

Who we are

Sustainable Delmarva is a tri-state effort that aims to increase sustainable development on the Delmarva Peninsula through citizen engagement, community visioning, action-planning, and regional networking. It trains regional stakeholders, those who affect or will be affected by decisions about Delmarva, to consider the whole community when working to preserve and enhance quality of life. Through inclusive community meetings, relationship-building opportunities, and the mobilization of an on-the-ground stakeholder networking program Sustainable Delmarva fosters learning and the sharing of ideas with the goal of strengthening the capacity of the region to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

The project was launched at the beginning of 2010 using the opportunity of a new decade and the challenges of an economic downturn to offer resources to preserve and enhance the quality of life of the Delmarva Peninsula. The project is led by long time sustainable communities practitioner Jennifer Hicks who guides local communities in the region - made up of parts of Maryland and Virginia, and all of Delaware and wedged between the Atlantic Ocean and the Chesapeake Bay - to identify and act from a set of common ground values and connect those actions to develop a bigger picture of what is desired on the peninsula.

Origins of the Sustainable Delmarva Concept

The early iterations of Sustainable Delmarva emerged while Hicks attended graduate school and discovered Systems Theory and great thinkers like Dr. Donella Meadows and Dr. Margaret Wheatley. Their teachings about the complex interconnection between nature, organizations, and communities crystallized for her that systems like human and natural communities must be understood as a whole rather than a sum of its parts. From this point, Hicks vowed to eliminate piecemeal efforts that yielded limited impact and instead, work at a high point of leverage to increase wide-spread ripple effects.

In 2004 Hicks started her consulting firm Positive Force Consulting to operate at that high point of leverage by providing capacity-building services for communities and environmental non profit groups in the Mid Atlantic region. She placed her emphasis on the big picture to determine how best to move closer to desired goals. She completed the Future Search facilitator training and became a member of the Future Search Network, and along with other tools like World Café and Open Space technology, began using the principles to promote a holistic approach to organizational effectiveness addressing sustainable development.

The Delmarva Peninsula became her area of focus once she realized the opportunities and challenges it faced choosing a path for sustainable development. Sustainable Delmarva is the culmination of her understanding of the need the region has for a vision for the future.

Conditions facing the Delmarva Peninsula

The Delmarva Peninsula is enriched by historic places, preserved small town life, and its relative accessibility to three major cities. However, Delmarva is dealing with the rapid growth and development that neighboring regions to the north and the west experienced a generation or more ago. But, because of

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its fragmented nature and the challenges of working across political boundaries Delmarva is not ready for growth and cannot respond to the needs of current and new residents sustainably.

This accounts for the grim assessment that, according to the US Environmental Protection Agency, almost 100% of the tidal waters and many of the fresh waterways in the region violate the Clean Water Act. And despite the fact that Maryland and Virginia are ranked as two of the 10 wealthiest states in the US, Delmarva is facing a 10%+ poverty rate and is home to the poorest counties in both states.

The perceived limitations of political boundaries and a weak culture of civic engagement inhibit the development of social bonds among those who live and work on the Delmarva Peninsula. Sustainable development relies on thoughtful decision-making by all who are impacted or who impact the situation, however, the required social connection is fragile. And according to Harvard professor Robert Putnam, author of the book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, social capital, or the strength of social bonds in a community, predicts how well a community or a region does overall.

Putnam and his colleagues discovered that a community's successes or failures are very much determined by the existence of networks, trust, and cooperation. He found that widespread participation in group activities and opportunities to work together created the conditions for good government and social prosperity. In contrast, a concentration of power, less social participation, and a more individualistic allocation of opportunities foster social and economic inequality.

Projects and Outcomes of Sustainable Delmarva

At a time when the Delmarva Peninsula is grappling to find ways to respond to growth and development Sustainable Delmarva offers a regional approach that has been shown to strengthen the abilities of communities to do well and grow sustainability. Through visioning and networking Sustainable Delmarva provides all stakeholders a chance to work together from a set of common ground values, take quick action, and honor the power of their collective wisdom.

Sustainable Delmarva provides opportunities for stakeholders to communicate, build meaningful relationships, and develop a collective vision on which to act upon moving the region closer to meeting the needs of all now and in the future. To do this Sustainable Delmarva:

- Conducts visioning conferences, using meeting models like Open Space, World Café and Future Search, to plan for the future of communities and the region. The outcomes include the development of common ground values and a set of short term and long term actions. At the same time the outcomes will be applied to a bigger system, the Delmarva Peninsula.
- Creates and maintain a resource clearinghouse to build upon communities' sustainable development achievements in the region. The web-based central "repository" will contain information and ideas and will maintain a blog. It will also highlight the work of local organizations and communities who contribute toward increasing regional sustainable development.
- Forms a network of regional Sustainable Delmarva "alum" to tap the wisdom and insights gained from their community's progress with the outcomes from their visioning conference. This will be enhanced through community events to further foster the culture of cooperation and relationship-building among stakeholders.

Since January of 2010 Sustainable Delmarva has been working with three communities in the region and has engaged close to 500 citizens representing dozens of stakeholder groups through the following:

- A World Cafe event in January 2010 entitled "A Conversation about the Future of Accomack County, VA" sponsored by Accomack County Board of Supervisors.

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- A visioning conference for the Nanticoke River watershed in March 2010 sponsored by the Nanticoke Watershed Alliance
- Chestertown World Café focusing on the future of Chestertown in June 2010 sponsored by the Town of Chestertown and the Center for Environment and Society at Washington College.

What Makes the Sustainable Delmarva Model Different?

Sustainable Delmarva uses large group conference models like Open Space, World Café and Future Search as a way for community members to create actionable knowledge from which to operate and immediately tap the resources that exist within the community to move their vision forward. These meeting models stand out because they require wide representation and involvement of the community and emphasize the importance of relationship building, trust, and civic engagement as part of community well-being. Most importantly, these models are open-ended where most other visioning processes create predetermined parameters in which the group must work.

Sustainable Delmarva works to engage stakeholders, especially those who have been marginalized in the past, and provides the support needed to complete the conference and follow through on the action planning. In addition, Sustainable Delmarva more than provides the outcomes desired by communities to take action on an issue. It creates effective ways for stakeholders to increase their role in the community, communicate with each other, and work together, thus, shifting the approach from an “us and them” structure to “us”.

Finally, no organization has focused solely on sustainable community development on the Delmarva Peninsula using communities as the primary catalyst for change. But it's clear that the peninsula has tremendous potential to become a model of sustainability for the Mid Atlantic region, as well as, the nation

Experience and Skills of Founder Jennifer Hicks

Jennifer Hicks graduated from Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania in 1995 with a degree in Elementary Education and a concentration in Environmental Education. In 2001 she earned her Masters degree in Environmental Studies from Antioch New England Graduate School. Before Hicks started her consulting firm, Positive Force Consulting, in 2004 she developed programs for environmental organizations including Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Clean Water Action, Seacoast Anti-Pollution League, and Chesapeake Climate Action Network.

Since 2004, Positive Force Consulting has successfully provided capacity-building services to over 50 clients in Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. Also, Hicks has made connections with over 100 organizations and communities on the Delmarva Peninsula around issues related to development using some or all of the principles of meeting models like Open Space, World Café, and Future Search. She has made a name for herself as an objective facilitator with the ability to examine the root cause of issues and to consider the whole system as it relates to the issue.

For more information contact:

Jennifer Hicks
Sustainable Delmarva
jhicks@sustainabledelmarva.net - www.sustainabledelmarva.net
(443) 282-0801