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## PARTNERSHIPS IN SUSTAINABILITY: THE TRANSITION TOWN MOVEMENT IN MINNESOTA

Leslie MacKenzie, MA Th., and Marty Lewis-Hunstiger, BSN, RN, MA

### Abstract

Transition Towns is a citizen-led movement that seeks to address individual and societal dependence on fossil fuels and the need to reduce greenhouse gas production in order to fight climate change. The foundation of Transition is permaculture, a design process based on whole-systems thinking informed by the patterns and relationships found in nature. Since its inception in 2005, the Transition movement has spread worldwide, as people in small groups and across large towns look for ways to take practical action to fight climate change: from home vegetable gardens to weatherization work parties, from time banks and tool shares to renewable energy systems. Transition looks different in every location because it meets the needs and draws on the skills of the local community. This article looks at Transition in one community: The Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, profiling several Transition Town groups.

**Key Words:** Transition Movement; Transition Town; energy descent plan; permaculture; climate change; sustainability; carbon footprint; greenhouse gases; relocalization; Inner Transition; climate resilience; partnership; hierarchies of actualization; community-based social marketing; resilience

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*Hope is the quality of character and the act of will that finds some good that can be achieved, no matter what the circumstances, and then tries to achieve it.*

John Michael Greer (2011)

## TRANSITIONING TO A LOWER-CARBON FUTURE IN THE TWIN CITIES

With a population of more than 3 million, the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, are the urban core of a fast-growing metropolitan area. Residents have a long history of civic engagement (Minnesota Compass, 2017) and a strong belief that things *should* run well. In Minnesota, things usually do. The state consistently leads the nation in voter turnout (Hargarten, 2017), educational attainment (Minnesota Office of Higher Education, 2017), health care access (Minnesota Department of Health, 2016), number of Fortune 500 companies per population (Ojeda-Zapata, 2017), and number of cooperatively-owned businesses (Kotila, 2013), to name just a few of its benefits.

As a far-north state, it's also ahead of the curve in feeling the effects of climate change. Minnesota has always been a state of weather extremes, but now those extremes have become even more unseasonal. It's hard not to notice that something is amiss.

- Winter temperatures are rising, with unseasonal thaws and freezes that put plants and animals at risk.
- Snow cover is coming later and leaving earlier.
- Lakes are warming, creating conditions for growth of toxic blue-green algae.
- Flooding is increasing. Minnesota has experienced 7 mega-rain events in the past 16 years, the same number it experienced in the previous 130 years.

While making progress on shifting to renewable energy - the state is sixth in the nation in electricity supplied by wind power (U.S. Energy Information Administration, n.d.) and the demand for oil is down 30% (Ngai, 2015) - Minnesota still gets 39% of its electricity from coal-fired power plants. Minnesota did not meet the carbon reduction

goals it set for itself for 2015 and is not on target to meet its goals for 2025 (Dunbar & Kraker, 2015). Many people in the state feel the need to do better.

Enter Transition Towns - citizen-led, all-volunteer groups that support individuals and communities in taking practical action to reduce their carbon footprint and prepare for the climate changes ahead.

## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TRANSITION TOWN MOVEMENT**

The roots of the Transition Town movement began in Kinsale, Ireland, in a permaculture program at the Kinsale College of Further Education. Teacher and permaculture designer Rob Hopkins and his students examined ways in which permaculture could address the intensifying and interconnected global ecological crises.

Permaculture is a design process based on whole-systems thinking that mimics the patterns and relationships found in nature (Permaculture Principles, n.d.). Developed by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren in the 1970s, permaculture includes a set of principles and ethics that have been applied in a wide range of contexts, from agriculture to home building, even economics. People can apply permaculture principles to daily life to make the transition from dependent consumer to responsible producer, building skills and resilience.

The systems approach provided by permaculture captures the complexity of the issues it addresses, while the three core tenets - care for earth, care for people, and fair share - provide a foundation that can inspire change.

As part of their research, Hopkins and his students became aware of the growing concern about “peak oil,” the concept that since oil is non-renewable, there will be a point in the future at which the rate of extraction will hit a peak and thereafter will decline (Ecolife, n.d.). Fossil fuels are a finite resource, and yet our global society requires oil and gas for almost every facet of life. When maximum production is

reached, how will the global economy respond to having less fuel rather than more? The students looked at their own community, took stock of its fossil fuel dependencies, and created the first community Energy Descent Action Plan (EDAP). The goal of the project was to demonstrate to local people how they could shift away from fossil fuel in food production, housing, health, transport, waste, and other areas of life. In 2006, the Kinsale Town Council provided financial support to begin to enact the plan (Swennerfelt, 2016).

Hopkins moved to Totnes, England, and continued to work on his vision of a community-led energy transition. It is in Totnes that the first “Transition Town” came to fruition, growing in members, influence, and community engagement. Hopkins told *The Guardian*,

There is no cavalry coming to the rescue. But what happens when ordinary people decide that they are the cavalry? Between the things we can do as individuals, and the things government and business can do to respond to the challenges of our times, lies a great untapped potential. It's about what you can create with the help of the people who live in your street, your neighbourhood, your town. If enough people do it, it can lead to real impact, to real jobs and real transformation of the places we live, and beyond. (Flintoff, 2013)

Transition soon spread to nearby towns, then countries, until it became a worldwide phenomenon. Groups ranging in size from a few people to entire towns have made changes from growing more food to building cooperatively-owned solar power, from starting barter networks to creating local currencies. Many of these efforts have been documented by the Transition Network on its website [www.transitionnetwork.org/](http://www.transitionnetwork.org/) and, in the US, on the Transition US website at [www.transitionus.org/](http://www.transitionus.org/).

### **Transition's guiding principles**

Transition is a network of small and large groups, with a systems understanding of the drivers of climate change, a common goal of reducing greenhouse gas production (most

notably by shifting away from fossil fuels), and a set of Guiding Principles. These Principles have changed somewhat over time. The list below includes Principles found on the Transition Network website and the original principles found in *The Transition Handbook* (Hopkins, 2008). The Principles are in no particular order.

**Respect for Resource Limits.** Making wise use of resources is at the forefront of how Transition groups operate.

**Positive Visioning.** Transition initiatives do not campaign *against* things. Rather, Transition groups help people and communities vision positive possibilities for the kind of future they would want to live in, and then work together to achieve them. Building - and telling - a new story is key.

**Help People Access Good Information and Trust Them to Make Good Decisions.** Because our knowledge is always changing, Transition initiatives strive to tell people the closest version of the truth known at the time, in a way that helps them feel empowered rather than powerless. Messaging is non-directive.

**Inclusion and Openness.** When it comes to climate change, there is no room for ‘us vs them’ thinking. Successful Transition groups try to ensure that their decision-making processes and projects reach the community in its entirety. Transition values diversity. Groups look different in different places because they are responding to the needs and using the resources of the specific community in which they operate.

The latest version of the Principles incorporates social justice, noting that the people who have the least economic, political, and ecological security are often affected first and worst by climate change. An earlier version of the Principles specifically included the local business community and local government as key partners in the transition away from fossil fuel dependence.

**A Sharing and Learning Network.** Transition is a global experiment. By sharing processes, successes, and failures, the movement increases the likelihood of achieving positive change more quickly and effectively.

**Subsidiarity: Self-organization and Decision Making at the Appropriate Level.** The Transition model does not centralize authority, and decision making is not controlled by an outside party or a higher authority. Transition seeks to replicate the ability of natural systems to self-organize.

**Balance.** Transition thrives because it enables people to do what they are passionate about - what they feel called to do. But it can be easy, given the urgency of the problem, to feel stressed and driven, rather than open, connected, and creative. Transition promotes and values a balance between head, hands, and heart, between action and reflection. It includes celebration and rest.

**Collaboration and Synergies.** Transition seeks to unleash the collective genius of the community to impact the most significant challenges of our time. To achieve the level of impact that's needed will require collaborations between and among citizens, nonprofits, businesses, local government, colleges and universities, farmers, energy companies ... the list goes on. Transition groups look for opportunities to create partnerships and a collaborative culture.

While not included in the list of Principles at this time, Transition also considers two other concepts: Inner Transition and climate resilience.

**The Inner Transition.** It's easy to jump to action upon hearing of a problem, but the challenge of climate change is as much a result of a worldview and value system as it is of a technology. For example, decades of effort to reduce greenhouse gas production have focused on energy efficiency (e.g., Energy Star appliances), and yet worldwide energy demand has risen (US Energy Information Administration, 2016). This phenomenon is known as Jevons' paradox: technological progress increases the

efficiency of a resource, but the rate of consumption of that resource will rise, negating any savings from those efficiencies (Alcott, 2005).

In other words, efficiency is not enough. Energy descent will require millions of decisions, made every day at every level of society, to reduce energy use. It will require a shift away from some cherished cultural beliefs, like that of continual growth, toward an ethic of sufficiency and a community that practices new ways of living. (Continual growth is not only a problem because of the polluting nature of our energy supply, but also because of limits of natural resources, like fresh water and rare earth metals.)

The challenges of growth and sufficiency are explored by many writers; two authors familiar to Transitioners are Richard Heinberg of the Post Carbon Institute, author of *The End of Growth: Adapting to Our New Economic Reality*; *Peak Everything*; and *Our Renewable Future: Laying the Path for One Hundred Percent Clean Energy*; and Sharon Astyk, author of *Depletion and Abundance: Life on the New Home Front*.

Another element of the Inner Transition is the need to come to terms with the emotional impact of the destructive forces of extreme weather, as well as the existential distress caused by knowledge of environmental changes ahead. This distress over the loss of familiar landscapes, called “solastalgia” by philosopher Glenn Albrecht (2007), can lead to feelings of disorientation, fear, grief, and even indifference. For a fascinating article on the psychological defense mechanism of indifference, see “Solastalgia, Soliphilia and the Ecopsychology of our Changing Environment,” by Paul Mason (2010) at [Neuroanthropology.net/](http://Neuroanthropology.net/).

Some Transition Towns host “inner transition” groups, drawing on the work of Carolyn Baker (*Collapsing Consciously*; *Navigating the Coming Chaos*; and *Love in the Age of Ecological Apocalypse*) and Joanna Macy (*Active Hope* and *Coming Back to Life*).

**Climate Resilience.** Resilience is often defined as the capacity to withstand shocks to the system and bounce back. Professionals in the field of climate adaptation, recognizing that climate change is going to change the human and natural landscape

irreparably, now talk of “bouncing forward” into a new reality. Transition initiatives seek to build individual and community resilience across a wide range of areas (local food, local business and economic systems, local energy production, etc.) and on a range of scales (from personal to township to region or state) as seems appropriate. To learn more about resilience in the context of a changing climate and a changing economy, see [www.resilience.org/](http://www.resilience.org/).

## THE GROWTH OF TRANSITION IN THE TWIN CITIES

In 2006, a group of concerned citizens, including policy makers, educators, employees of government agencies and energy organizations, students, and activists, formed the Twin Cities Peak Oil Working Group. This was not a Transition group; Transition was only just beginning to emerge in the U.K.

The group anchored its work in the model of relocalization, “a strategy to build societies based on the local production of food, energy and goods, and the local development of currency, governance and culture. The main goals of relocalization are to increase community energy security, to strengthen local economies, and to improve environmental conditions and social equity” (Post Carbon Institute, n.d.).

In 2007, the group produced the *Twin Cities Peak Oil Resource Guide: Information and Ideas for Community Sustainability*, written by Alexandra Frankel and Mary Morse (Morse was then with the Neighborhood Energy Connection). This 32-page report examined the potential impacts on Minnesota of a reduction in oil and gas availability on key areas of life: transportation, food production, and housing/home heating and cooling. It also included sections on public policy, investment of public money, and measures to discourage inefficiency.

The document was distributed at a 2007 conference sponsored by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency entitled “Preparing Your Community for Climate and Energy Change: Opportunities for Local Sustainability.” At that time the Minnesota House of

Representatives was holding meetings to learn about the challenges of fossil fuel dependence. Presciently, Daniel Lerch of the Post Carbon Institute told lawmakers that state and local governments should not assume that future federal actions or the energy market would correct the problem. “Local leaders need to be looking out for their own vulnerabilities,” he said. Nine years later that remains true (Busse, 2008).

About this time, some members of the Peak Oil Working Group started to gather at a local coffee shop, the Blue Moon, to study the Transition movement and its interconnected issues - climate change, peak oil, and the economic drivers of both. It met often over the next four years, and several leaders emerged in the areas of economics, energy, and overall Transition organizing. A few people became official trainers in the Transition process.

### **Two early neighborhood groups**

Several neighborhood-level Transition groups formed at this time, but did not last, usually due to lack of participation but sometimes as a result of interpersonal conflict. Two groups have continued to this day: **Transition Northeast** and **Transition West Side/West St. Paul**.

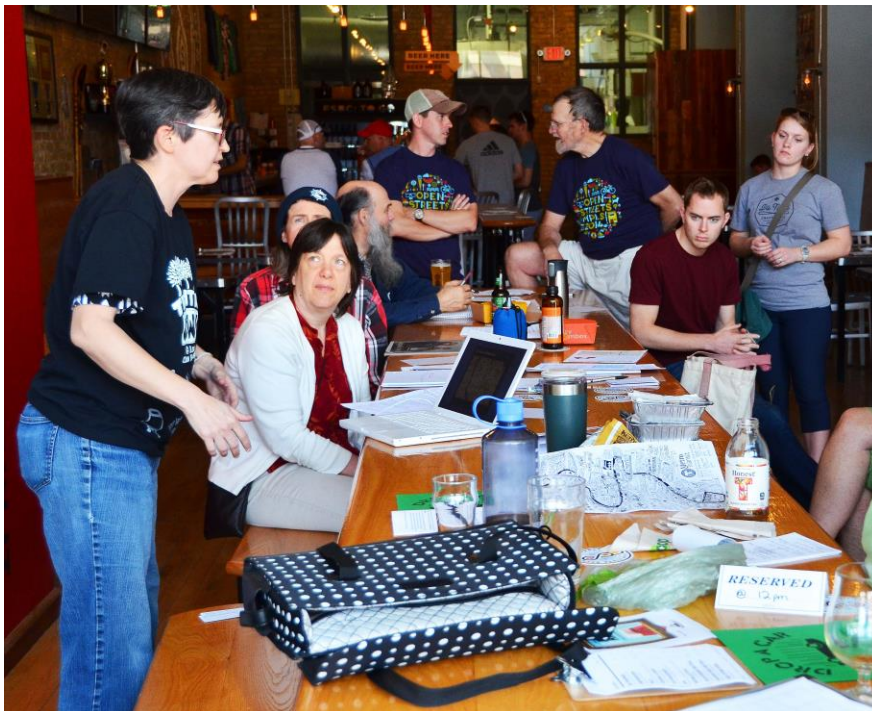
**Transition Northeast** formed as a result of a plan to create an urban/rural economic project linking people in the Twin Cities to rural land. The project developed from a course taught by Wilhelm and Leslie Reindl through EXCO (a local experimental college). The seeds were planted for creating some community-owned assets and the development of new skill sets. These ideas are still core to the meetings that continue today, although some of those early members have moved away from the Twin Cities.

The neighborhoods that comprise Northeast Minneapolis are a diverse mix of socioeconomic classes and ethnic groups. Its history of light manufacturing gives it a grand inheritance of buildings that have worked well for artists’ studios, maker spaces, and now, the brewing industry. The Mississippi River forms the eastern border of

Northeast, and its history, geography, and hydrology play an important role in sustainability and livability initiatives.

Tim Jordan, an architect, and Peter Doughty, a writer, facilitate monthly meetings at Diamonds Coffee Shoppe to discuss Transition-related topics and to plan activities, including movie nights and work sessions such as making biochar (a soil amendment made from biomass). A particular interest of Northeast group members involves food growing, permaculture, and cold-climate growing technologies. Members were involved in building a walipini (a sunken greenhouse) at a local church. The structure is designed to capture and store daytime solar radiation to extend the growing season well into the winter.

The group recently hosted a Day of Skillshares, with presentations covering food and energy topics: growing microgreens, cooking with less energy, extending the growing season, constructing a multi-unit rainwater collection system, alternatives to car travel, how to create a personal energy descent plan, and options for weatherizing windows. A report about the event in *Northeaster*, the local newspaper, introduces readers to biochar, hayboxes, microgreens, and walipinis (Peterson, 2017).



**At Skillshares Day hosted by Transition Northeast, Pat Thompson of Transition ASAP talks about strategies for becoming less car-dependent. Photo courtesy of Mark Peterson.**

**Transition West Side/West St. Paul**, operating in two adjacent neighborhoods along the Mississippi River, has been in existence for about 10 years. The group had a very active period in the past when it helped establish a tool-sharing library, held weekly meetings, hosted movie nights with potluck dinners, presented guest speakers, and held other assorted community-building and skills-sharing events. After a quiet period, the group is once again working to grow its membership. According to Lee Olson, organizer for the group and a staff member at Macalester College in St. Paul, the latest incarnation of the group doesn't yet have a mission statement, but past missions have valued community, resilience, using fewer resources, helping the environment, and saving people money.

Current activities include a knitting group and a once-a-month "open table" at a local brew pub, a kombucha brewing gathering, a severe weather talk, and an indoor salad gardening class. Future plans include more movie nights and possibly a book club.



**Kombucha brewing with Transition West Side/West St. Paul**

The group's strongest community connections right now are with Growing West Side and the West Side Community Organization (WSCO). Olson says, "The two groups complement each other. Growing West Side has a Saturday morning Farmer's Market and many community events focused on locally grown healthy food. WSCO has a new environmental justice group that we plan to work with."

### **The movement grows**

In 2010, **The Alliance for Sustainability**, a local nonprofit organization, invited Richard Heinberg, senior fellow at the Post Carbon Institute, to give a presentation at South High School in Minneapolis. The first half of his talk focused on the interconnected issues of climate change, peak oil, and economic instability (this was just two years after the 2008 economic crash). The second half of his talk was about Transition Towns and the Transition answer to these challenges.

**Transition Longfellow** (more on this group below) formed at this time, as did **Corcoran Grows**.

**Corcoran Grows** operated successfully for three years as an official subcommittee of its neighborhood association. It hosted neighborhood-wide sustainability fairs, held home weatherization parties, helped launch Millie's Peace Garden, and planted hazelnut and raspberry bushes. The committee withdrew from its formal relationship with the neighborhood association and took some time for "mulling," before they re-emerged with a new mission and vision in 2017 that includes a social justice focus. The group is now a separate entity that partners with the neighborhood association on communications and projects. They have a mailing list of some 250 people and are currently engaged in projects for pollinators, native planting, and improved water quality, funded by the watershed district.



Cleaning storm drains in Corcoran Neighborhood

**Transition North Twin Cities** formed in the fall of 2013 in the northern suburbs of Minneapolis and St. Paul. The group draws people from a large geographic area, including Andover, Anoka, Blaine, Brooklyn Park, Coon Rapids, East Bethel, Fridley, Minneapolis, New Brighton, Ramsey, Shoreview, Stillwater, and St. Paul. Because of the greater distances its membership covers, the group has focused on connecting with the people who come to the gatherings rather than on connecting with the large number of institutions that exist in the various communities.

According to group organizer Tom Jablonski, an environmental specialist with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, gatherings are designed to “share ideas and support each other as we transition to simpler lives in community with our neighbors and our ecosystem. We try to follow the Transition Model, and find the concepts of peak oil and climate change big motivators in driving us to change the way we live.”

Anywhere from 5 to 15 people typically attend the bi-weekly meetings, though the group’s mailing list is about 50. They meet in members’ houses, local coffee shops, parks, and businesses. Meetings include time to talk about climate change and peak oil, share ideas and resources, watch movies, share the bounty from gardens and gardening

knowledge, and support one another to transition to a more conscious way of life. Recent meeting topics included garden herbalism; tool-making; a presentation on trips to Rwanda and El Salvador depicting aspects of a simpler life; reviewing Dmitry Orlov's new book, *Shrinking the Technosphere: Getting a Grip on the Technologies that Limit Our Self-sufficiency and Freedom*; learning about The Simplicity Institute; growing wine cap mushrooms in home gardens; learning about the Ecological Democracy Network; and pollinator-friendly gardening.



**Transitions North Suburbs members learning to grow microgreens.**

In 2013, **Transition Town All St. Anthony Park (Transition ASAP)** solidified its current role as a Transition Town (see more below).

## **TRANSITION TWIN CITIES**

The Alliance for Sustainability - particularly its executive director, Sean Gosiewski - has played a pivotal role in connecting people from the various groups with one another. The Alliance hosted large yearly conferences that focused on sustainability efforts, with participation by business and government as well as individuals and communities. The

last Alliance conference took place in 2013. The organization then shifted its focus to resilience and energy planning in suburban areas. About the same time, the annual Living Green Expo, Minnesota's largest sustainability fair, also ended operations. This created a vacuum of connection in the community.

In 2015, Leslie MacKenzie, a volunteer with Transition Longfellow, became concerned that the shared TransitionTC website was inoperative. As Transition Longfellow and Transition ASAP grew in visibility and programming, Transition as whole was becoming less visible. She also believed there was a need for greater collaboration and sharing of resources in order to increase the effectiveness of the small, dispersed groups. She connected with a local family foundation and received a small grant to begin inter-group organizing efforts, to help start new groups, and to increase the visibility of Transition in the Twin Cities.

She started **Transition Twin Cities**, a resource hub and information space for local Transition (and Transition-like) groups in the Twin Cities and across Minnesota. It is also the central location for communication with the groups, and for presenting the message of Transition to the broader community. MacKenzie handles social media, communications, and community outreach.

While MacKenzie firmly believes in the unique benefits of the Transition model - the systems understanding that comes from permaculture, the Guiding Principles, and the focus on community building as an essential component of Transition work - she takes an inclusive stance. A national Transition trainer visiting the Twin Cities said, "Transition is not a brand we need to protect." In other words, when talking to a group (for example, a church creation care group, a company green team, or a neighborhood environment committee), rather than convincing them to become a Transition group, MacKenzie can help them see how the actions they are already taking fit under the umbrella that is Transition. Anyone can do Transition-type activities to move the ball forward. The most important thing is to *do something*.

## **The partnership potential to transition the Twin Cities from fossil fuels**

Transition Town groups in other parts of the world have created major changes in their townships, cities, and countries through diverse partnerships leading to systems change. That has not yet happened to a great extent in the Twin Cities, but MacKenzie sees many elements of the low-carbon transition and a more localized economy already present. Some of these initiatives are well established and well-funded; others are new or under-utilized. Some Transition groups have already partnered with these and other organizations (\*); some are potential partnerships waiting to be developed. (The list below is not inclusive of all the real and potential partnership resources.)

### **Energy**

- **Minnesota Renewable Energy Society**, promoting solar, wind, and geothermal energy and teaching the renewable energy workforce
- **Clean Energy Resource Teams\*** and **Fresh Energy\***, two resources that Transition groups have used to inform citizens about participation in community solar gardens
- **Center for Energy & the Environment\***, a nonprofit that provides information on energy conservation and offers enhanced energy audits
- **Center for Earth, Energy & Democracy**, a nonprofit that provides energy justice and climate resilience training in communities of color, as well as policy work

### **Food**

- **County Master Gardeners\***, with hundreds of university-trained gardeners providing thousands of hours of free education to the general public, community gardens, public housing project gardens, and school and 4H groups on subjects such as growing vegetable gardens and planting for pollinators
- **Minneapolis and St. Paul Public Parks\*** systems, which have begun to engage with the community on urban agriculture and food forest planning
- **Permaculture teachers\***
- **Bee enthusiasts**, such as Beez Knees and the Bee Lab at the University of Minnesota

- **Minnesota State Horticultural Society** Garden-in-a-box and Minnesota Green programs
- **Seed Sages\***, a seed-saving training organization and seed hub incubator
- Urban farmers\* and rural farmers\*
- Community kitchens and church kitchens\*
- Garden stores\*
- Farmers' markets\*

### **Housing**

- **Twin Cities Cohousing Network**
- **Community land trusts** working to keep housing affordable

### **Biking:**

- **NiceRide**, a bike-sharing service
- Several bicycle coalitions, promoting bike infrastructure in both cities

### **Local Investing**

- **Northeast Investment Group\***, comprising of neighborhood residents who pool their funds and buy and rehab empty, run-down buildings in their community
- **CoopPrincipal\***, an investment group that teaches new investors how to invest in cooperatively-owned businesses
- **MnVest**, a community investment portal for everyday citizens

### **Sharing**

- **Northeast and St. Paul Tool Libraries\***, a cooperatively owned venture in which members have access to the use of shared tools
- **Hour Dollar**, a time-service barter network
- **HourCar**, a car-sharing service

### **Reuse**

- Reuse\* and repair businesses
- Hennepin County Fix-It Clinics
- Hennepin County reuse program, Choose to Reuse
- Eureka Recycling\*

### Informational/Educational Resources

- **7 major colleges and universities\*** in the Twin Cities, many with expertise in sustainability, food production, engineering, energy, etc.
- **EXCO** - Experimental College with classes offered by and for the community
- **Public Schools\*** community education programs

### Government Agencies

- Neighborhood associations\*
- City council members\*
- Public health departments\* for resources on climate change and health
- Emergency services departments\* for resources on climate preparedness

### Tapping the power of social networks to effect change

Why should government agencies take time to partner with loose-knit groups of citizen volunteers? Because successful Transition Town groups can bring something to the table that almost no one else can - social networks.

In the field of study called community-based social marketing (CBSM), environmental psychologist Doug McKenzie-Mohr is a leader in identifying effective ways to create lasting behavior change. He is the author of *Fostering Sustainable Behavior: An Introduction to Community-Based Social Marketing* (2012).

Behavior change is the cornerstone of sustainability - whether reducing the use of fossil fuels by changing driving habits or saving topsoil and sequestering carbon by using cover crops. Community-based social marketing combines the fields of psychology and social marketing, understanding that to change a behavior we must first understand the barriers to change that exist at the individual and community level, and then look for ways to overcome those barriers.

McKenzie-Mohr and his colleagues in the field of CBSM have discovered that the information-intensive strategies most commonly used by government and nonprofits to create behavior change have had strikingly little impact. Information-intensive

programs tend to be based on one of two change models: The attitude-behavior change approach or the economic self-interest approach.

Research in the field of environmental behavior change shows that there is often very little connection between the attitudes people hold, the level of knowledge they have, and the behaviors they engage in (McKenzie-Mohr, 2012, pp. 3-5). Research has also shown that advertising campaigns, like those used by utility companies to inform people about ways to save money by conserving energy, have had little effect on actual energy use, despite massive financial investments (p. 6).

CBSM research has shown that social aspects of behavior - interpersonal communication, role modeling, social diffusion, and social norms - are key to creating lasting change. As social beings, people are far more likely to do what their neighbors, family, and friends are doing.

As social networks, Transition groups have the potential to use all of these social strategies to effect change. Government agencies cannot, on their own, use these strategies, but by partnering with citizen groups or key, socially connected individuals within a community, they may find all of these strategies at their disposal. Helping hands, a deeper reach into the community, and a better understanding of individual and community barriers are some of the ways citizen groups can help government agencies accomplish their goals. (MacKenzie believes government should consider funding Transition groups, even though they may not be nonprofits, as a way to build the partnerships it needs to do the work it seeks to do.)

To truly benefit from the use of social strategies, however, government would do best to involve citizen groups early in the planning process. The systems approach that Transition brings to the table, its focus on community building and resilience, and its understanding of community needs and resources should inform the tactics chosen to achieve goals.

## Transition (resilience) groups and resistance groups

On the website Resilience.org, authors Chuck Collins and Sarah Byrnes (2016) say:

Both resistance and resilience-building are necessary. Resistance requires a bold assertion of community rights and individual voices to interrupt, block, and prevent encroachment by a politically powerful fossil fuel industry. Resilience requires creativity, resourcefulness and reskilling - along with focus on the long haul and building institutions. (Collins & Byrnes, 2016)

There is a growing body of academic research on the connection - or lack of connection - between resilience groups like Transition Towns and the much larger resistance and social justice movement. The journal *Resilience: International Policies, Practices and Discourses* has focused an entire 2017 issue (Volume 5, Issue 1) on resilience and solidarity.

At their best, Transition Town groups look at the problems of climate change, dependence on fossil fuels, and an unstable economy, and take practical, pragmatic action to build or strengthen alternative systems for a post-peak-oil future. In reality, small groups with limited capacity typically put most of their focus on actions individuals can take - and less on community.

In Europe, these connections are being made more explicit. In the US, these connections are growing. States in the northeastern US have seen the rise of the Resilience and Resistance network (see <http://www.resilience.org/stories/2016-05-23/resilience-resistance-a-recipe-for-justice-and-sustainability/>). Resilience groups such as Transition, and resistance groups such as 350.org or Resist the Pipeline, approach the climate change/fossil fuel economy problem with different strategies and tactics. They may attract different types of people. These differences can create divisions, but when all parties are valued, can provide a more complete picture of the problem and the scope of possible action.

In the Twin Cities, the connection of resistance and resilience has happened only on a personal level, as people involved in Transition may (or may not) also be involved in resistance efforts. But for resilience work even to be possible, Transition groups may need to develop connections to and partnerships with resistance and social justice groups to strengthen community rights. (Learn more about community rights at <https://nationalcommunityrightsnetwork.org>).

Resilience often refers to measures designed to make citizens better able to cope with sudden changes in their surroundings by expanding capabilities and training, reinforcing infrastructure or encouraging networks of mutualism and cooperation.... [T]his understanding of resilience eschews the idea that coping with vulnerability, often the result of a depletion of rights, might also require new rights claims: rights to housing, care, political participation, economic and ecological security. (Vrasti & Michelson, 2017)

Depletion of rights is evident in communities across the nation, with the unbridled use of eminent domain laws and preemption. In Minnesota, the legislature recently preempted a Minneapolis plastic bag ban. Minnesota, like 43 other states, has pre-emption laws in place that prevent local communities from crafting their own laws restricting the use of pesticides (Beyond Pesticides, 2010).

## **TRANSITION TOWNS AND THE PARTNERSHIP PARADIGM**

Riane Eisler's Cultural Transformation Theory views human cultural evolution from the perspective of the contrasting configurations of the partnership system and the domination system as two underlying possibilities for structuring beliefs, institutions, and relationships (Eisler, 2014). The core configuration of the domination model, as seen in Hitler's Nazi Germany, Stalin's USSR, the Taliban of Afghanistan and fundamentalist Iran, and Idi Amin's Uganda, is characterized by:

- **A structure of rigid top-down rankings, *hierarchies of domination*** maintained through physical, psychological, and economic control.
- **The rigid ranking of one half of humanity over the other half** - historically, the ranking of the male half over the female half, accompanied by the higher valuing of “hard” qualities and behaviors such as violence, conquest, and control.
- **Culturally accepted abuse and violence.** Every society has some violence, but cultures orienting to the domination model show institutionalization and even idealization of abuse and violence to maintain hierarchies of domination.
- **Beliefs that relations of domination and submission are inevitable, normal, and even moral,** reinforced in cultural teachings and stories.

The core configuration of the partnership model (exemplified by some contemporary tribal societies and some technologically advanced Nordic countries) also consists of four interactive components:

- **A democratic and egalitarian structure,** found in both the family and the state or tribe. Such rankings as do exist are *hierarchies of actualization*, with power *to* and *with* rather than power *over*, aimed at inspiring and supporting rather than controlling.
- **Equal partnership between women and men,** with a high valuing, in both women and men, of nonviolence, nurturance, and caregiving—qualities denigrated as soft, feminine, and unmanly in the domination model.
- **Abuse and violence are not culturally accepted.** Such violence as exists is not institutionalized or idealized because it is not needed to maintain rigid rankings of domination.
- **Beliefs about human nature that support empathic, mutually respectful relations.** Cruelty and violence are recognized as human possibilities, but are not considered inevitable, much less moral. (Eisler, 2014, pp. 6-8).

### **Some challenges presented by the partnership paradigm**

From its beginnings, the Transition Town movement has been characterized by attributes that orient to the partnership model rather than the domination model: decentralization and localization, respect for diversity of opinion, gender inclusivity, and hierarchies of actualization. Those who are drawn to sustainability initiatives tend to be people who also resonate with and support these partnership attributes, or at least are comfortable with them. However, a lack of an authority or structure to fall back on to resolve interpersonal conflict when dealing with very controversial or divisive issues could partially explain anecdotal descriptions of Transition groups dividing, dissolving, or re-forming when confronted with major obstacles.

The less rigid, more fluid hierarchies of actualization characteristic of partnership-oriented structures are very effective in groups with enough self-directed members, skill sets, and resources that the main leadership function is logistical coordination. However, in small or homogenous groups, or those with actual or perceived scarcity of resources, the leadership tasks of inspiring, lending energy, attracting and welcoming new members, and giving direction to uncertain members can overwhelm potential leaders. When these tasks are needed but not fulfilled, groups may either falter and disintegrate, or else become insular, with efforts that are parallel instead of synergistic.

The remedy for both leadership burnout and the paralysis of unresolved conflict in neighborhood Transition groups is relationships, fostered by frequent, regular contact with the other members of the group, with other individuals and groups in the neighborhood, with other neighborhood groups, and with national and international groups when opportunities arise (see end of article for information about an upcoming national gathering). With regular contact can come perspective about divisive issues, as well as energy for the journey.

## **TWO EXEMPLARY NEIGHBORHOODS**

### **Transition Longfellow**

The Longfellow community comprises four neighborhoods in South Minneapolis with a combined population of more than 28,000. Greater Longfellow is known for its small bungalows, its bikeability and walkability, and its commitment to green spaces and sustainability. It was a test site for the City of Minneapolis organics recycling program. In addition to two garden businesses, it is home to the last remaining World War II victory garden, and has a very active garden club, a committee that cares for nature areas along the Mississippi River Gorge, an active environment committee, and a Transition group - Transition Longfellow.

Transition Longfellow began in winter 2011, shortly after the presentation by Richard Heinberg describing the dire situation regarding climate change and promoting the global Transition Town movement. Attendees met afterward to talk about what they might do as a community. There were 25 people from Longfellow; four of them decided to start Transition Longfellow.

Transition groups are social groups with a strong focus on action, so the organizers began by planning two events a month: a movie night with a potluck meal, for people to meet their neighbors and learn more about the issues, and a “mini-challenge” group in which people could get ideas and support to take practical action to reduce their individual carbon footprints.

These activities fit well with the group’s mission to share knowledge about climate change mitigation, provide support for people who want to take action, and create a vision for a positive future that values people and the environment. While retaining the movie night as the central gathering time, the group expanded its activities over time to include:

- Skillshare events focused on growing, cooking, and preserving food
- Chard Your Yard, a raised-bed vegetable garden project that has installed raised beds in home and apartment yards every year for five years (more than 150 beds to date). The neighborhood association has underwritten half the cost of the beds for senior, low-income, and disabled residents.
- Group building events, making such things as little free libraries and solar cookers
- Community visioning conversations (general and health-focused)
- An energy fair, in partnership with its neighborhood association environment committee, that exposed participants to new role models as well as low- and no-energy options for homeowners, businesses, and churches
- One-night and four-week workshops on “Preparing to Go Zero Waste,” in association with Junket Tossed & Found, a local reuse business
- A home brewing group that later spun off to become its own entity, the Longfellow Homebrew Club
- A knitting group
- A sustainable finance group in which participants explored ways to bring their financial lives in line with their values, and then to influence financial practices in the larger community (with family, at work, with local government, etc.)
- An “inner Transition” group providing an opportunity for people to share difficult emotional responses to climate change

Six years on, Transition Longfellow is perhaps the best-known and most active Transition group in the Twin Cities, primarily due to its strong social media presence and the willingness of its core volunteers to staff information tables at city- and state-wide events. It has an active Facebook community of 660 and a mailing list of approximately 400. The core organizing team consists of 6 to 12 volunteers (half long-time members and half coming in and out of the group for stints of six months to two years). Core group members call on others in the community to help with specific projects, thereby expanding their ability to offer programs.

Transition Longfellow invites community members to share their knowledge and then secures a location, does the marketing, and provides a platform for that sharing. Events take place in neighborhood coffee shops, churches, park buildings, and restaurants. It conducts approximately four activities a month on a budget of less than \$1,000 a year.

The group has partnered on numerous projects with the environment committee of its neighborhood association and with Hennepin County Master Gardeners on vegetable growing classes and garden site assessments. Gandhi Mahal, a local restaurant committed to sustainable food, has been a stalwart supporter of the group by providing space for classes and community meetings. A neighborhood herbalist has offered several workshops; a local realtor taught a cooking class; a local business owner teaches classes on making and using solar cookers; a neighborhood carpenter opened his shop for the group to make 15 little free libraries.



**"Garden mob" volunteers and homeowners on Chard Your Yard install day in the Longfellow Neighborhood**

In 2016, the neighborhood association tapped the group to help with a city project to engage neighborhoods in climate adaptation work. Transition Longfellow was well

prepared to do so; few if any other organizations in the City of Minneapolis have engaged the community on this issue, but this group has held several conversations on this topic.

The outcome of that city-community initiative is not yet evident, but Transition Longfellow has chosen to continue the work by putting together a six-part series of monthly climate conversations entitled, “When Climate Change Comes Home.” Speakers provide residents with concrete information about how climate change will affect their homes and health, and what they can do about it. Each session ends with time for community members to think about what they can do together to create a caring and prepared community.

The first speaker was Paul Moss, Climate Adaptation Coordinator for the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA). He presented updated data from the state climatologist detailing the effects Minnesotans are already seeing, and what they will see in the next ten years and beyond. In a letter to the group following the first presentation, he said:

In my role as coordinator of the Interagency Climate Adaptation Team and the MPCA’s Climate Adaptation Team, I have seen that although a number of Minnesota communities are starting to prepare for the impacts of climate change, much work yet needs to be done... Proactive outreach, such as through this lecture series, is an important component for increasing community and individual preparedness. It is particularly impressive and important that Transition Longfellow and your community are taking the initiative to reach out to educate and help organize your neighborhood regarding climate change impacts. Longfellow’s work promises to pay important dividends in a more resilient neighborhood in the years ahead. (P. Moss, personal communication, May, 2017)

While the group continues to look for ways to help individuals consider what they can do to reduce their carbon footprints, in 2017 the group is focusing more of its efforts on preparedness and community building in the face of climate change.

### **Transition Town All Saint Anthony Park (Transition ASAP)**

Located in the northwest corner of St. Paul, Minnesota's capital, St. Anthony Park is one of the city's 17 districts, with a population of approximately 8,200 people. In 2008, residents who were part of a small community group called Neighbors for Peace read *Plan C: Community Survival Strategies for Peak Oil and Climate Change* (Murphy, 2008) and found it to be life-changing. The group had worked for decades to promote nonviolence and had become interested in how climate change affects security, conflict, fear, and aggression. It was not clear to them, however, how individuals could effect change.

In *Plan C*, Murphy described how individuals have direct control over two-thirds of U.S. energy use and greenhouse gas emissions. Suddenly the issue was not someone else's responsibility. People felt empowered to act. After reading *The Transition Handbook: From Oil Dependence to Local Resilience* (Hopkins, 2008), the group saw a way to engage their community in this effort, and *The Transition Timeline for a Local, Resilient Future* (Chamberlin, 2009) reinforced the effectiveness of that path.

By 2012, the group was called the Energy Resilience Group. It joined the district's Community Council as a subcommittee of its Environment Committee. Because two members had worked with and on the Council, they knew that "... in order to address climate change, large-scale collective (e.g. policy) decisions on infrastructure, land-use patterns, built environment, and social mobilization are required" (Burch et al., 2014, p. 481).

In 2013, three dozen people met to determine whether to broaden the effort. Each invited one other person to a meeting, and said, "Be prepared to work." The group

became a Transition group, and seven action groups formed and began to meet regularly. Transition Town All St. Anthony Park was born.

From the outset, the all-volunteer planning group practiced radical democracy. Each month, different people hosted the meeting, compiled an agenda, and facilitated. Just as the group sought to recognize and build one another's strengths, they also respected limitations, and took on projects and actions only when someone was willing to lead the effort. Through all this work, the group has tried to strike a balance of work and repose, meeting in each other's homes, sharing food, and having social time before each meeting.

According to Michael Russelle, a soil science professor and one of the core organizers, the group is gentle with one another. While each has taken steps to lower her or his contribution to climate change and work hard to help others join in, they have each chosen different sets of practices. Russelle says, "We may not all be fully aware of the impacts of air travel, diet, and area of living space on emissions, for example. Just as we experienced a revelation reading *Plan C*, we learned in George Marshall's book *Don't Even Think about It* (2014) that '...climate change [is] a journey of conviction which will contain periods of doubt and uncertainty as well as moments of personal revelation and sudden awareness' (p. 236)."

To educate the neighborhood about the causes and impacts of global climate change, Transition ASAP showed videos and led discussions, wrote articles and commentaries for the local newspaper, began an online newsletter, invited speakers, co-sponsored backyard talks, generated a special collection of reference materials in the public library, and engaged people at the annual neighborhood arts festival. An artist in the group designed and distributed small signs with a colorful, lower case letter "t," standing for Transition. Mounted in a window, the logo identifies households that are adopting Transition practices.



**Smaller footprint. Stronger community.** This is the group's tagline. It reflects the need to reduce emissions of climate-forcing compounds ("greenhouse gases") by reducing fossil fuel use both directly (e.g. by minimizing driving of private vehicles and fuel use for home heating) and indirectly (e.g. by lowering the demand for ruminant animal products and reducing material flows through the household). Equally, it signals the need for improved social bonds and networks, common goals and priorities, more resilient infrastructure, etc.

**Action groups.** Seven action groups work on their own initiatives. The action groups are transportation, home energy curtailment, community solar, sustainable food and land, zero waste, housing alternatives, and Reflective Circle (a forum to consider how to deal with our responsibility for climate change).

Several members of the **Transportation** action group joined with the Transportation Committee of the District Council. Together, they work to improve public transit routes and people's knowledge of how to use transit, reduce traffic speeds, increase the number of safe bicycle routes and pedestrian crossings, reduce the number of privately owned vehicles, promote electric or hybrid vehicles, and improve access to light rail from public housing facilities through sidewalk additions and conditions.

The **Community Solar** action group is working with the Minnesota State Fair, adjacent to the neighborhood, as a potential host for a large Community Solar Garden array mounted above a parking area.

The **Sustainable Land and Food** action group organizes workshops on foraging, growing fruits and vegetables, and preserving the harvest.

When the **Housing Options** group proposed a controversial zoning change that would allow accessory dwelling units on single family lots, strong disagreements arose (Leebrick, 2014); even the Transition planning group was not unanimous in its support. The operational model of the group is to let action groups lead their own initiatives

without interference, as long as they are consistent with the means and ends desired in Transition.

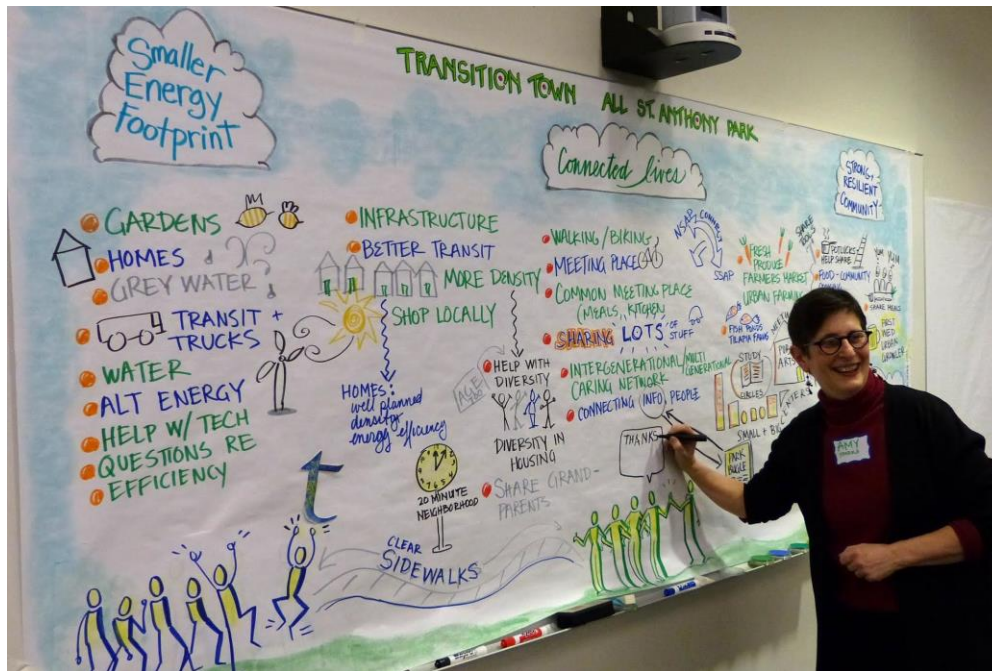
In addition to the action groups, Transition ASAP has a liaison who connects with classes and clubs in nearby schools, and the group is forming relationships with the local Somali community through picnics, outings, and conversation.

**Events and activities.** In 2014, Transition ASAP was selected by a community vote to receive a major grant from a community foundation. The group has held a number of community meetings and resource fairs. Two community events are planned for this fall: a celebration of the work accomplished so far, with ethnic foods, music, and singing, and the more serious topic of emergency preparedness for individuals and communities, with presentations by local planners and responders.

The largest task of the group is to develop an energy descent action plan as part of the St. Anthony Park 2040 Plan. Action groups have begun drafting chapters for the Plan based on several hundred responses to a survey of what respondents reported life should and could be like with a smaller footprint and stronger community. These chapters will be available for community review and revision. In conjunction with this work, the group was directly involved in developing the goals for the District Council's Ten-Year Plan. Those goals are moved up to the city level and will become part of the City of St. Paul Comprehensive Plan. In this way, input of Transition ASAP will broaden the topics usually considered in the St. Paul Comprehensive Plan.

**Funding and support.** More than 400 people are now on the group's email list. Many more know about the group. Unlike other Twin Cities Transition groups, Transition ASAP operates with significant funding, which it receives from the neighborhood's Community Foundation, individual contributions, a matching contribution by an employer, and reduced rental fees for meeting rooms at Luther Seminary. Funding has allowed Transition ASAP to hire student interns.

**Supporters, partners, and allies.** The *Park Bugle*, a neighborhood newspaper, offers free space for a bimonthly column. The Metro Clean Energy Resource Team provided in-kind assistance with developing outreach efforts to disadvantaged community members and with designing a survey. The District 12 Community Council serves as the group's fiscal agent, and partners directly to engage the community in discussions about priorities for change. The Community Council and the Hampden Park Food Co-op promote the group's activities through their online newsletters.



**Transition ASAP**  
engaging the  
community in  
energy descent  
planning.

Transition ASAP is supported by several local churches, where meetings and workshops are held and films shown. The Food Co-op has hosted outreach and face-to-face survey events. Noll Hardware provided clothesline and hardware at reduced cost for people who want to use solar power to dry laundry. The public library displays a special collection of reference materials and has provided space for meetings and films. Gibbs Farm, a local historic site, loaned an apple press for a Cider Fest. Several local architects developed *pro bono* plans for a variety of accessory dwelling units. Many businesses regularly display flyers that advertise Transition ASAP events.

## NEW GROUP, NEW ENDEAVORS, NEW RESOURCES

As this article is being written, a **new Transition group** is forming in the neighborhood surrounding Macalester College, a liberal arts college in St. Paul. Kristi Fackel, a staff member at Macalester, reports that the group is in the early stages, discussing what name to choose and whether to be a campus-based group or a combined campus-neighborhood resident group. Another group is forming in North Minneapolis, one of the most economically depressed parts of the Twin Cities. That group has met several times and currently has a focus on gardening and food resilience.

The Transition Town movement was very visible to new audiences on the night of June 10-11, 2017. **Northern Spark**, a wildly popular annual overnight arts festival that attracts upwards of 50,000 visitors each year, chose the theme *Climate Chaos/People Rising*. Artists from three metro Transition groups worked together to create an experience that in true Transition fashion involved the community in its creation and execution. **TransitionNOW! Twin Cities** was a multi-part project that sought, through tiny books, t-shirts, and the installation of a grove of trees, to make some truths visible:

- Climate change is real, and it's happening right now.
- Many people already know this and are taking action in their everyday lives to reduce their carbon footprint.
- The commitments we make to transition away from fossil fuels and overconsumption can have an impact for good for the planet and for future generations.

Transition artists created three custom logos for glow-in-the-dark t-shirts, and a dozen logos representing sustainable actions. They invited the community to come to the Minnesota Center for Book Arts to get a free t-shirt to wear to Northern Spark, and to customize their shirt with logos of actions the wearers have taken in their own lives to reduce their carbon footprint. Wearing their glowing t-shirts on the night of the event allowed these folks to be role models for sustainable action.

Transition ASAP artist Regula Russelle worked with graphic designer Ruby Thompson to create tiny books the size of gum wrappers. These beautiful little books were distributed around the festival, informing people about how their lifestyle changes can have a positive effect and how they can join with their neighbors to create change through Transition.

Finally, at an installation called the Grove of Life, the artists and Transition volunteers invited Northern Spark visitors to write on a paper leaf a commitment they will make to reduce their carbon footprint, and then put it on a tree.



**The Grove of Life at Northern Spark. Photo courtesy of Anne Marie Forrester.**

Several of the trees - and all of the leaves - were saved to be shown at the first-ever **Transition US National Gathering**, July 27-30, 2017 at Macalester College in St. Paul. Community resilience builders from across the nation will meet to build connections, share skills and knowledge, and generate new ideas for creating an unstoppable movement of resilient local communities. By hosting this important event in the life of

the Transition Town movement, Minnesota will offer hospitality and support and lend energy to the many people who acknowledge the uncertainty of our world and are willing to face the future with courage and love.

This issue of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies (IJPS)* contains **three other articles related to the Transition Town Movement**. Center for Partnership Studies founder Riane Eisler interviewed Ruah Swennerfelt, author of *Rising to the Challenge: The Transition Movement and People of Faith*. (Swennerfelt will be one of the presenters at the national gathering.) In a review of Swennerfelt's book, partnership scholar Ann Amberg introduces readers to the lives and stories of individuals all over the world who have a passion for a sustainable future. And in "Building a climate movement through relational organizing," Bethany M. Divakaran, teaching assistant in the School of Nursing at the University of Minnesota, and Julia Nerbonne, director of Minnesota Interfaith Power and Light, a coalition of faith communities working to address climate change, discuss relational community organizing to build a social movement, develop leaders, and create sustained community power in the context of the modern climate justice movement.

The Fall 2017 issue of *IJPS*, published in October, will be a theme issue on Partnership and the Environment. As always, all *IJPS* articles are open-access, with no limits on disseminating and sharing with proper attribution.

*Doing and making are acts of hope, and as that hope grows, we stop feeling overwhelmed by the troubles of the world. We remember that we – as individuals and groups – can do something about those troubles.*

Sr. Corita Kent (1992, p.1)

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