

The Role of Conversation in Forging a Path toward Sustainability in Nebraska

By **JAY LEIGHTER** AND **KATIE TORPY**

In a 2007 "Sustainability Science" article entitled "Inventing the Future: Scenarios, Imagination, Mastery and Control," Yale professor of resource policy and management Gary Brewer opens with the statement, "No one has any idea whatsoever of what human systems or decision pathways will look like 25, 50, or even 100 years from now." To his statement I might add, "and yet we are supposed to prepare for our future."

What must we do?

The path toward more sustainable conditions in Nebraska does not yet exist, or at least it, for the moment, it is

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not clearly marked. We must forge our own path with the resources that we have available to us. Nebraska has natural resources in abundance and in com-

bination that are equal to or greater than any other state. It is hard to imagine that Nebraska has a shortage of resources when considering the avail-

ability of land, water, energy, food and building materials. Of course, some of these resources are in jeopardy, some have potential yet to be realized and some are at the center of heated debates over best use.

There is another resource that will be crucial for the state of in the effort to forge a path toward sustainability: humans. Before that notion sinks in as trite or cliché, let me qualify what I mean. As Brewer states above, it is not possible to envision precisely what human systems will look like in the future not because we do not have the capacity to imagine them but because of

CONTINUED ON PAGE 20

Conversation *from page 19*

the uncertainty that will surely be presented to us. In fact, it is our imaginations that will be necessary to deal with the uncertainty. And by imagination I mean our collective imagination. Moving toward more sustainable conditions will require imagination, creativity, innovation and the capacity to think together to solve complex problems. The most abundant resources available for use in this way are human resources.

Beyond Brewer's comment in "Sustainability Science," it is also striking to notice how many articles call for putting human resources to use in these ways. That is, in and among the articles examining the health of ecosystems, social systems and economic systems, there are repeated calls for communities, schools and governments to come together, to think creatively together, to learn together and to work together to solve problems. Many sophisticated procedures, models and plans exist to serve these purposes, and many of these will be necessary for Nebraskans charting a path toward sustainability.

But perhaps a simple activity will serve us as we start charting this path, an activity we can all participate in: conversation. The May 26 Conversations Conference on Nebraska Environment and Sustainability (CCNES) in Grand Island convenes Nebraskans to do just this. The third of four such conferences to take place in Nebraska, the CCNES forum represents an opportunity for central Nebraskans to consider how best to conserve and develop our state's resources: Land, Water, Food, Energy and Materials. Recommendations from each of the resource conversations will be shared with local and state government.

The Joslyn Institute for Sustainable Communities is organizing the Conversations Conference for central Nebraska in partnership with Central Community College and the Omaha-based

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Sustainability Leadership Institute. The conferences series is underwritten by the Nebraska Environmental Trust, the state Department of Environmental Quality, the Nebraska Investment Finance Authority and Lincoln Electric System.

Visit www.nslw.org/conversations.html to learn how you can participate.

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