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Resilience crucial in advancing sustainability

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In 2005, Eugene Mayor Kitty Piercy's Sustainable Business Initiative involved local firms and agencies in dialogues about the methods and benefits of addressing the "triple bottom line" of sustainability — often called "people, planet and profit" — in their decision-making. The initiative helped many private companies and public agencies learn about the triple bottom line. It also led to the creation of Eugene's Sustainability Commission and to its adoption of the triple-bottom-line framework.

Eugene would benefit now if city government launched another broad-based initiative, this one focused on helping people build the three S's of human resilience: self-regulation, social support and strengthening resources.

Unless these capacities are widely enhanced, the environmental, economic and social equity aspects of the triple bottom line will be increasingly difficult to achieve.

The triple bottom line addresses the external physical aspects of sustainability. For example, the city has used it to consider where to site new residential and industrial development, how to improve transportation, and other issues.

As beneficial as this is, the triple bottom line is not designed to enhance the psychological or psychosocial competencies required to continually advance sustainability in the face of rising adversity. This is a critical missing element because, as seen around the world, the trauma and toxic stress generated by climate change will increasingly cause individuals and groups that lack these capacities to harm themselves, others and the natural environment.

After Superstorm Sandy, for instance, researchers found that 20 to 50 percent of East Coast residents experienced post-traumatic stress disorder, severe depression or high anxiety, problems that linger today. Houston and Puerto Rico will see similar psychological troubles due to recent hurricanes.

Many people directly affected by wildfires also experience PTSD that can persist for years, a problem California will experience due to its recent fires. Major floods can produce similar psychological disorders.

Reports indicate the murder rate in Puerto Rico has increased. In cities across the United States, hotter temperatures have been associated with increased assaults, burglary, aggression, violence and other maladies. When disasters occur in the midst of hotter temperatures, these syndromes often become even more extreme.

Trauma can cause people to withdraw into a self-protective survival mode that leaves them uninterested in issues like conserving the environment and reducing carbon emissions. They frequently also aggravate racism and other forms of systemic oppression, undercutting social equity.

Widespread expansion of the three S's of human resilience can prevent these harmful reactions, and help reverse them when they occur. It can also help individuals learn how to use adversity as a catalyst to find new meaning, purpose and hope in ways that benefit other people, the economy and nature.

The first S, self-regulation, is about helping adults and young people learn how to calm their emotions and thoughts in the midst of hardship. This involves developing a basic understanding of how adversity can affect the mind and body, as well as skills to regulate and calm the nervous system when distressed. Most people find it comforting to know they can calm themselves in any difficulty.

The second S, social support, involves helping people build and maintain strong social support networks. People with two or more family members or friends they can rely on for unconditional emotional support and practical assistance have much greater capacity to respond constructively to all types of hardship. They are also psychologically and physically healthier.

The third S, strengthening resources, is about transforming transient resilience-enhancing thoughts and actions into lasting strengths. Helping people learn how to live in accord with their core values and continually practice positive

behaviors such as assisting others or restoring nature strengthens the internal resources needed for resilience.

City government could play a role similar to the one it performed during the Sustainable Business Initiative by engaging leaders in education, government, business, nonprofit and faith organizations in discussions about how they can enhance human resilience. The city could also assess existing levels of resilience and identify programs that help build it.

Neighborhood resilience councils might then be formed to coordinate local efforts to enhance the three S's, and numerous organizations could launch their own programs.

Mirroring the Sustainable Business Initiative, a city resilience commission could also be established to support local initiatives and ensure that all city decisions enhance, rather than diminish, human resilience.

Eugene has become a leader in sustainability nationwide. By advancing the three S's of human resilience, the city would not only prepare residents for future disasters, it would once again blaze a trail that other communities can follow.

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