

## Our Sustainable Acre in the City

*By Melanie G. Rios* 2080 words

“If we don’t change how money works, then nothing’s going to change,” says Mike Ruppert, one of many voices warning about the effects of Peak Oil, impending economic collapse, and global warming. They argue that there is no source of energy on the horizon that will keep our growth-addicted economy afloat, nor would we even wish another inexpensive source of energy to appear given the destructive effects of material consumption on our planet. Urban communities have an opportunity to become “lifeboats” as petroleum-based agriculture declines, jobs dependent on oil are lost, and people around us become frightened and hungry. We can be inventors and stewards of information, systems, and tools to share with others who come flocking for help if we begin preparing ourselves now for this effort.

Here at Maitreya EcoVillage, 25 of us live in several houses, apartments, and a few smaller dwellings on an acre about five minutes by bicycle from downtown Eugene, Oregon. Some of us are tenants and a few are landlords, and I’d say the common purpose of our 16-year old community on five adjacent city lots is to live in a cooperative, sustainably oriented setting with neighbors and friends. Our shared common facilities include large organic gardens, a small orchard, a cob guest cottage, a strawbale community center, beautiful residences made from recycled and sensitively harvested wood, some low-budget dome dwellings, and some renovated conventional housing. We hold optional meetings whenever someone calls one, and make decisions by consensus. Our two property owners, who live on site, have veto power over issues that significantly affect the land or their finances, but so far they’ve not exercised that veto. There’s a “waiting list” to become a tenant here, in that when someone moves out, their room filled by those who remain in the same housing unit. Usually It will be a friend of the community.

I’d like to tell you what we’re doing to support each other and our neighbors to live more sustainably and prepare to live in a world with less petroleum, and how we’re

encouraging our government to support us in this. The following six “economic principles for new villagers,” could, if implemented at many levels, help steer us in a direction that would leave us happier, healthier, and more sustainable than our current economic practices.

### **Principle #1: “Don’t Delay!”**

We’re headed towards a sustainable culture one way or another. Will a few survivors scratch a living from the dirt while living in unheated huts, or will more of us enjoy abundance and warmth? The latter vision is more likely if we use our remaining fossil fuels now to transition towards sustainable practices such as increased organic farming and renewable energy.

Two months ago I looked at a driveway alongside of one of our houses where cars were parked, and thought “What is a self-respecting ecovillage doing with cars on its property?” So I asked my fellow ecovillagers for ideas on converting that space to something more life-enriching. Now organic vegetables are growing there and the cars are banished to the street. Food not driveways! This project involved plenty of sweat, but was also made easier by renting a jackhammer for a couple of days to break through compacted gravel and cement. We envision creating more garden space on our yet unused nooks and crannies and rooftops as we attract more urban farmers to live here. And our dreams don’t stop at the boundaries of our property; we are ready to help others convert lawns, roads, roofs, and parking lots into gardens with bike paths and/or gathering spaces.

Better to do this now than wait a few years, when it may be much more expensive to get the fuel for the equipment and power tools that can help us.

### **Principle #2 : “Total-Cost Accounting”**

The total cost of a product, including environmental costs associated with its creation, use, and disposal, should be included in its price. In the same way that tobacco companies paid for damage caused by its product, I believe other industries should be required to pay for their true costs of doing business. If oil companies paid for the contribution gasoline make to increased lung cancer, traffic accidents, and global warming, then gas prices would increase, which would discourage folks from driving. Proceeds from a hefty tax on gasoline, in addition

to covering car-related medical costs, could be used to invest in public transit and medium-density, mixed use urban redevelopment. This would further reduce traffic and contain urban sprawl, retaining valuable farmland for food production.

We support this principle at Maitreya EcoVillage by providing free bus passes and the use of bike trailers to our residents, and ask them to park their cars on the street. We also ignore current prices when deciding what products to purchase. For example, vinyl windows are inexpensive to buy, but we didn't use them in our new buildings. Their low price doesn't account for the cancer-causing chemical compounds they outgas when they are produced or as they burn in landfills at the end of their life cycle. We make our own windows out of sensitively harvested or recycled wood, though it takes lots of time to craft them, and thus costs us more. It feels good to know that in this way we're not contributing as much to the accumulation of poisonous chemicals in the environment, which are so pervasive they're even found in the breast milk of the Inuit.

### **Principle #3: "Money Doesn't Buy Happiness"**

In 2004 the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation did a study and found that children raised in working-class and middle-class homes were happier than children raised in wealthy homes, implying that something other than money contributes to happiness and well-being. Paradoxically, when people don't make enough money to have even the basic necessities for physical health, and the lack of jobs leads to crime, this creates the opposite of happiness. And wealthy people often consume more natural resources and manufactured goods than is good for them or the planet.

At Maitreya EcoVillage we question the assumption that working harder or accumulating more money and consumer items leads to the good life. Many work part-time, earning incomes below the official poverty line, but our lives feel rich in connections and beauty. With our time freed up substantially from income-producing work, we nurture each other and our land, play music, dance, and meditate together, read and study, and are active members of our larger community. Partly because we have less money to spend, we drive fewer miles in cars, and buy fewer things we might later throw away. All 25 of us fit our trash into one family-sized barrel each week.

Imagine if our government diverted the millions currently spent on wars to control oil fields to instead create part-time government jobs geared towards transitioning to sustainable agriculture, homes and businesses, similar to Roosevelt’s Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s? Money would be better spent insulating homes and installing wind generators and water catchment systems than spending millions to kill people in other countries to get their last remaining petroleum reserves just to continue an unsustainable oil-based way of life.

#### **Principle #4 : “Close Resource Loops”**

In a sustainable economy everything would be recycled. Biological “wastes” from one process will be “food” for another process. Leftover by-products of industry such as chemicals and metals would be carefully separated and reused.

One way we do this at Maitreya is to compost our kitchen scraps to fertilize our organic garden, which not only feeds us but produces slugs, which are eaten by our ducks, which provide eggs for breakfast and manure for our compost—one large happy circle of resource sharing. This concept can be applied to every production process.

#### **Principle #5 : “Support the Local Economy”**

Ellen, who raises dairy goats at her farm outside of town, brings us homemade goat cheese and gallons of raw goat milk once a week. We make the milk into kefir, add fruits and berries from gardens, and pour it over granola we make with ingredients from our local food co-op. Sometimes we go out to Ellen’s farm to get goat manure for our compost piles. Supporting local businesses strengthens the local economy, which is important as it becomes increasingly expensive to import food and other goods from far away.

If it becomes too costly for Ellen to drive to town each week due to rising gasoline costs, we envision starting a business called “Urban Shepherds” (which assumes the local government will rescind its laws against keeping goats in the city). We’ll raise goats here and not only use the milk ourselves and sell to our neighbors, but bike around town with goats in our custom-built bicycle trailer, letting them feed on blackberry vines to clear land for gardens.

## **Principle #6: “Participatory Democracy”**

True participatory democracy extends to our daily lives at Maitreya EcoVillage and is grounded in shared access to education and resources. We make some decisions by consensus, such when we decided to each contribute \$15 dollars per month to the upkeep and maintenance of our stawbale community center. Most decisions, though, are made by the individual Maitreya residents with initiative to carry out projects, advised by other people here with expertise in that area or who might be affected by those projects. For example, one highly skilled gardener here decides where and when to plant vegetables in our primary garden, but only after he consults with others who also use that space about what they like to eat.

Maitreya EcoVillage is not yet a truly democratic place because of its ownership structure, as several of us own the land and the rest of us rent. We hope to find compatible people to buy the parcel with our most beautiful and sustainable dwellings, including the passive-solar triplex and our cob community center. We would use the proceeds of this sale to pay off the mortgages on the house where one landlord lives and one other house, and place all the land under these buildings as well as that of the new owners’ building in a land trust to ensure that Maitreya EcoVillage will be protected from future sale for real estate speculation, and forever be dedicated to exploring how we can live more sustainably upon our planet.

I’m currently involved in helping organize the upcoming regional permaculture gathering in Cascadia Bioregion (the area from British Columbia to Northern California). Our 2006 Bioregional Sustainability Convention will explore how we might organize ourselves if our federal government continues to find it difficult in these challenging times to promote democracy and sustainability. (*See “Our Vision for Cascadia Bioregion,” pg. \_\_.*)

While plenty of other principles could be added to this list (please email me with your ideas), I believe these “Economic Principles for New Villagers” can help guide our thinking as we create a new culture in response to the challenges ahead.

*Melanie Rios is a community activist, mother, urban farmer, violin teacher, and ecovillage steward in Eugene, Oregon.*

*maitreyaecovillage.org; Melanie at rios.org.*

Sidebar:

## Our Vision for Cascadia Bioregion

*Please see our website: [www.permatopia.org](http://www.permatopia.org).*

*Vision:* To foster the creation of ecologically sustainable communities which have thriving local economies, participatory decision-making, and peaceful means of resolving conflicts.

*Goals:*

- To increase awareness of global resource depletion and environmental degradation, and to inspire people to view this as an opportunity to improve our lives through the creation of healthy, sustainable, local economies.
- To encourage friendship and cooperation amongst neighbors.
- To create environmentally sustainable jobs so that people can have their basic material needs met while making positive contributions to their communities.
- To create neighborhoods with interspersed homes, workplaces, shops, schools, churches, and parks so that basic goods and services are within walking distance of our homes.
- To encourage people to look for happiness in their lives through participating in relationships, art, music, spirituality, connection with nature, and meaningful work.
- To apply appropriate technology and permaculture principles to create sustainable systems of food production, shelter, energy, healthcare and other basic needs.
- To eliminate waste by using waste products from one production system as resource inputs for creating other products.
- To create decision-making councils which are democratic and participatory, where policy supports the common good.
- To create an economic system that motivates us to make healthy decisions in what we purchase and how we use our time.
- To establish effective means for conflict resolution.

—M.G..R