

NW neighbors work to make world a better place

By Mark R. Johnson

The Bulletin Correspondent

It wasn't your typical neighborhood get-together. The gathering of 12 Federal Street residents sat in a circle and spoke of global matters.

Their conversation concerned issues of recycling, garbage reduction, and water conservation. In a newly forged partnership, they united in an effort to help preserve the planet.

That, and to get to know one another.

Neighbors learning, practicing and promoting sustainable lifestyle practices is the premise of EcoTeams, a program of the Global Action Plan for the Earth (GAP). GAP was founded a decade ago in New York as a non-profit education organization, and its EcoTeams are part of an international effort that spans 16 countries.

Later on, as the Federal Street team was becoming better acquainted, they had to wrestle with their first challenge as a group: identifying a mission statement.

After input from everyone in the room, combining a list of key words pertaining to the environment and the neighborhood, the neighbors paraphrased their intent: "By developing community togetherness, we can share knowledge, find inspiration in ourselves and others and make a difference in our immediate world."

Someone read it aloud. It had big ambitions but it was grounded in tangible terms. They all agreed to it. The team was off and running as Central Oregon's 202nd EcoTeam.

Under the direction of a coach, EcoTeam members follow a workbook, with chapters including topics on minimizing household garbage, using water efficiently, saving energy and practicing transportation alternatives. Lifestyle improvement tips include things like taking a recyclable mug when going for coffee, using faucet aerators and turning off computer monitors when leaving them for long periods of time.

They're all simple tips that have a positive affect on the planet — and the household checkbook.

Participants meet bi-weekly and learn how they each can make a small-scale difference to lessen environmental impact on the planet, and how together they can effect a large-scale change. They track their personal actions over a four-month period, and are responsible for educating one another by leading discussions.

Actions taken to create sustainable practices are valued with points, and members of the team put together as many points as possible. At the end of the four months, participants can request a free itemized environmental resource savings report from GAP

which shows, in numbers, how they made a difference.

Through such reports teams are able to discover how much they've collectively spared the local landfill and, incidentally, how much money they've saved.

Each year, EcoTeams across the country eliminate as much as half of their landfill-bound garbage. They conserve as much as 34 percent of their water usage. They reduce their carbon dioxide waste by as much as 17 percent, and use 20 percent less fuel for transportation.

According to GAP, a diligent household can easily save \$300 or more annually if they adhere to basic EcoTeam practices.

GAP offices are based in Portland and Bend in Oregon, and in five other cities throughout the country: Philadelphia; Kansas City; Madison, Wis.; Columbus, Ohio; and Issaquah, Wash.

Many EcoTeams are formed "at large," put together by self-starters who organize themselves and submit for the materials. GAP works through contracts established with local and state governmental agencies.

The local GAP office, created three years ago, is a member group of the Central Oregon Environmental Center. Its staff members, campaign manager Elaine Sigvaldsen and program

manager Ellen Santasiero, together with scores of volunteers, bring the teams together.

"Given the number of participants involved thus far, more than 3,000 in Deschutes county, there is apparently a demand to build up neighborhood communities that are committed to adopting more resource efficient lifestyles," said Sigvaldsen.

In short, helping to change the world is as simple as getting to know your neighbors, sharing information, and altering old habits, one neighborhood at a time. For more information on EcoTeams, contact the local GAP office at 330-2646 or www.ecoteam@empnet.com.