

Pique News Magazine – Letter Sustainability is Dynamic

[This letter appeared in the May 3 edition of Pique Newsmagazine, the Resort Municipality of Whistler's weekly newsmagazine]

Brent Leigh deserves credit for highlighting the importance of social concerns in the pursuit of sustainability (April 19). His call to be “clear on the values we are trying to aspire to” might yet light the way ahead for a community that stands at a crossroads. Still, there were two ideas in his story that didn't ring entirely true.

The first was the suggestion that sustainability is about balance. While the metaphor of the three-legged stool makes for convenient shorthand, it simplifies the most vexing challenge of sustainability – it is *not* about balance, it is about the dynamic interplay of social, economic and environmental aspirations and the tradeoffs that must be made as one moves towards sustainability. A key question (perhaps the key question) facing Whistler is how to define the criteria that will allow good tradeoffs to be made.

The second idea that piqued my interest was Leigh's call to celebrate employees during an upcoming week-long “event”. This is, of course, admirable, but it also potentially masks a harsh reality – what about the other 51 weeks of the year? How authentic are the relationships between employers and employees? What constitutes a “living wage” in Whistler? What differences exist in employer – employee relationships in resort communities from other communities? The list of questions goes on, but the point is simple – while periodic celebrations are good, even catalytic if done well, we shouldn't lose sight of the bigger picture.

Brent Leigh is quite right in his call to focus our energy on the social dimension of sustainability. My comments are intended to help him, and others, sharpen their thinking and focus when they take up his call to arms.