



SUSTAINABILITY ON WHEELS

A Montreal-based non-profit - a socially and ecologically conscious “meals-on-wheels” gets rolling with a new sustainability action plan.

The Santropol Roulant is a non-profit organization in the Plateau neighborhood of Montreal with a mandate to provide meals-on-wheels for individuals living with a loss of autonomy, seniors and individuals with disabilities. Founded in 1995 with entrepreneurial spirit and funding by Youth Service Canada, the organization brings people together across generations and cultures through its innovative service, intergenerational activities and volunteer programs. Twelve staff and a large team of volunteers prepare over 90 meals per day, five days a week from food either grown in a Santropol Roulant rooftop garden or sourced locally and then deliver them to clients. Where possible, delivery is by foot or by bicycle.



A volunteer delivers hot and healthy meals throughout Montreal

The meals-on-wheels service is the “heart of the Roulant,” and members have built a vision around it of becoming a model organization for sustainable food security, healthy communities, and intergenerational relationships. In accordance with The Natural Step sustainability principles, the Roulant strives to fulfill its vision without contributing to: 1) the systematic increase of materials extracted from the Earth’s crust; 2) the systematic increase of chemicals and compounds produced by society that are toxic, long-lived, and non-biodegradable; 3) the systematic degradation of nature; and 4) conditions that systematically undermine people’s ability to meet their basic human needs.

FOCUS ON SUSTAINABILITY

In the early 2000s, with environmental consciousness blooming in the minds of the general public, the Santropol Roulant, along with many other non-profits across Canada, began to question the environmental impacts of their operations. As a response, the Roulant launched their Eco-Challenge / Éco-Défi, a program designed to inspire staff and volunteers to think about how the Roulant could potentially lessen its ecological footprint.

Although the Roulant introduced its Eco-Challenge as a means of improving the organization's environmental performance, the staff soon discovered it had an additional benefit. With so much public interest in sustainability, and so little clarity about what sustainability actually means and how to move towards it, non-profit organizations struggle to demonstrate the value of their initiatives to the bodies that fund them. Much to its delight, the Roulant discovered that its funding partners embraced the Eco-Challenge / Éco-Défi program as "one of its most compelling pieces of programming."

In addition to maintaining funding relationships, the cost savings associated with energy and waste reduction offer substantial advantages to non-profit organizations, helping them to do more of what they are good at with fewer resources.

SANTROPOL ROULANT AND THE NATURAL STEP

With the environment in mind, the Santropol Roulant's Executive Director, Jane Rabinowicz, attended a presentation on The Natural Step at McGill University in February 2006. On the strength of what she heard, Rabinowicz then sought and gained funding to have The Natural Step Canada (TNS Canada) train the Roulant team in the TNS Framework. The result was a series of three workshops in 2006 and 2007.

Creating Awareness

In July 2006, TNS hosted its first workshop for the Roulant, introducing the main concepts of The Natural Step Framework. Befitting the organization's entrepreneurial nature, the Roulant staff and volunteers dove headlong into the work. Among other discoveries made that first day was the encouraging realization that the Roulant had a number of assets that would ease its transition towards sustainability. For instance, it was already running a number of sustainability initiatives, including a rooftop garden, a community bike repair workshop, and a friperie (second hand clothing store). It was producing locally sourced and organic meals; it had an arrangement with a local grocer to pick up and use the store's surplus produce; and it was managing a large-scale worm-compost project for nutrient cycling. Another asset the team identified was its organizational culture, in which experimentation is encouraged and change embraced. The Roulant approach promotes flexibility, innovation, inclusiveness, participation, shared learning and financial prudence, all within the context of having fun!

Baseline Analysis and Vision-building

In November 2006, the Executive Director and a cross-departmental team of the Roulant staff and volunteers participated in a second, two-day workshop that was delivered in both French and English. A workbook tailored for the organization led the participants through the process of developing a baseline analysis of their current sustainability practices, creating a compelling vision of what the Roulant might look like as a sustainable organization in a sustainable society and, finally, brainstorming a long list of possible actions that could move the Roulant towards its vision.

The Roulant identified a number of key improvement areas. As expected, the organization – despite all its good initiatives and positive assets – found itself in violation of all four of The Natural Step’s sustainability principles. In particular, the Roulant team recognized the need to: move toward use of renewable energy;

The Natural Step Framework has led to a more explicit approach to our sustainability work here at Santropol Roulant, it gave us the push to consider that having a sustainability coordinator is important to make sure the work gets brought to the forefront of our mission. It’s important because sustainability is a value we all share, it’s important to our community. It’s why a lot of people are curious about our work - our sustainability direction. If we are going to be a player or a role model in our community, then we need to give sustainability a key role, something explicit that people can see.

DANNY BOUCHARD
VOLUNTEER COORDINATOR, SANTROPOL ROULANT

reduce the amount of waste, water and transport associated with the purchase of products it uses; and to invest in building improvements for their office space. They also identified the need to communicate their commitment with all staff and volunteers, partners and the wider community.

The participants recommitted to their sustainability declaration, with a new understanding of the four sustainability principles informing a vision of the future. The declaration reads:

We recognize the inherent unsustainability of our global system; the increasing demand for limited resources combined with a decline in life-supporting systems; the growing gap between rich and poor, and the economic and political forces preventing a more just and equitable world.

We use food as a vehicle to break social and economic isolation between generations and to strengthen and nourish our local community. We engage a diversity of people to take an active role in their communities through initiatives that address the health and food security needs of local people. With these considerations in mind, we are working towards the economic, social and environmental well being of the Santropol Roulant, its members and the outlying community.

The workshop concluded with a brainstorming session that identified a long list of potential actions Santropol Roulant could take that would move it towards a more sustainable future.



Santropol Roulant is closing the loop on the production, use and disposal of food

Down to Action.

The last workshop in the series, in February 2007, focused on turning the ideas for action from the earlier brainstorming session into a sustainability action plan. As a first step, the proposed actions were evaluated using three defining criteria: Would the proposed action or investment:

1. Actually lead towards sustainability?
2. Provide a stepping-stone for future actions?
3. Provide a return on investment sufficient to support further work towards sustainability?

With the answers in hand, participants prioritized the actions that survived the screening process and used them to create a sustainability action plan with an implementation timeline.



The Eco-Challenge / Éco-Défi program was streamlined to focus on eight key strategic areas for the Roulant. Of the dozens of actions brainstormed by participants, those listed represent the most strategic for the organization to pursue in 2007-08.

1. **Energy:** a) conduct a energy audit; b) switch to more efficient lighting; c) insulate basement; d) reduce temperature of hot water heater; e) install solar panels/collectors.
2. **Water:** a) conduct a water audit; b) reinforce education around resource efficient dishwashing; c) reduce water flow through toilets.
3. **Food:** a) develop a seasonal menu and work with more local and organic food; b) emphasize canning, preserves, dried herbs; c) follow-up on bio-fuels made from animal fats.
4. **Materials:** a) conduct a waste audit; b) replace paper towels with cloth ones; c) eliminate the use of disposable serving trays and replace with reusable ones; d) invest in duplex printer and photocopier.
5. **Communication and Outreach:** a) develop an anti-idling campaign (driver education); b) host community discussions and guest speakers on relevant topics; c) use website and blog to communicate the program.
6. **Transport:** a) adopt a carbon offset policy; b) replace current cars with hybrid-electric vehicles; c) research bio-fuels options.
7. **Policies and Partnerships:** a) institute collective health and dental insurance; b) make ethical investments; c) initiate a buying club for local and organic foods.
8. **Healthy Communities:** a) hire a Sustainability Coordinator; b) support leisure activities/team building c) work with other organizations on food security for the city.

In the months following the third workshop, the Roulant got rolling with many sustainability initiatives. As just a few examples, the organization has:

- ⊙ hired a full-time Sustainability Coordinator;
- ⊙ hosted a series of public conversations on biofuels, carbon offsets, local currencies, inter-culturalism and social involvement;
- ⊙ conducted a waste audit of the organization's operations with volunteers from the community;
- ⊙ sent out a birthday postcard to all of the Roulant partners with the "Sustainable Roulant story" on the back;
- ⊙ participated in a major sustainability conference in Sherbrooke, Quebec in June 2007 which profiled the Roulant's work;
- ⊙ Replaced paper towel with cloth towels;
- ⊙ Replaced plastic bags used in meal delivery with cloth bags made from old clothes sourced from the Roulant's Friperie;
- ⊙ Replaced one of two delivery vehicles with a gas-electric hybrid model; and
- ⊙ Held canning workshops to take advantage of the plentiful Fall harvest.

To help measure the Roulant's progress towards sustainability, the organization has developed a number of indicators, including:

- ⊙ the weight of vegetable harvested;
- ⊙ the percentage of food sourced from garden/donations/purchased;
- ⊙ the weight of compost;
- ⊙ a waste audit;
- ⊙ the number of hits on Eco-Challenge website;
- ⊙ the number of visits to the bike shop;
- ⊙ the miles per gallon on delivery cars;
- ⊙ a check list of board-level policies;
- ⊙ client surveys; and
- ⊙ collection and compilation of stories about personal behavioural change.

Most of the immediate cost savings for the Roulant centre on the food production cycle. The kitchen saved close to \$3000 in 2007, due in large part to partnerships with local grocers and wholesalers to recover surplus foods. Another savings was recognized in that half of total compost in use on the Roulant's rooftop garden came from food waste- worm bin nutrient cycling. This worm bin nutrient cycle alone amounts to an estimated savings of a few hundred dollars for the organization.



Fruits and vegetables harvested from Santropol Roulant's rooftop garden help the organization close the loop on their production, save money and are fun to grow!

LAST WORDS

With long-term plans such as establishing an office space in a green building in mind, the Roulant staff and volunteers are freshly motivated to pioneer new ways of looking at sustainability. By thinking creatively and adopting innovative practices, they intend to build their organization into the best community role model it can possibly be. The Roulant maintains its fun and playful approach on its journey toward sustainability, because, “always with the Roulant, it’s not just what we do, but how we do it.”



“Always at the Roulant, it’s not just what we do, but how we do it.”



ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

www.santropolroulant.org

This case study was written and researched by Laura MacKay and edited by Bart Robinson for The Natural Step Canada. Thank you to Jane Rabinowicz and Tim Murphy for granting The Natural Step interviews. Creative Commons Copyright 2007 Some rights reserved

