Twenty years of promoting business practices that demonstrate environmental stewardship, economic vitality, and social responsibility.
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Friends,

Our 20th anniversary has been an exciting year in the making.

We have welcomed our first full-time director and dramatically grown our participation through exciting new programming, increased presence and focused initiatives. We will continue to offer unique learning opportunities and facilitate outcome-driven work groups and initiatives.

As newly elected board president, I am first honored to be given the opportunity and am excited to be a part of a reenergized and challenging group of individuals and businesses in West Michigan. It is the mission of WMSBF to promote business practices that demonstrate environmental stewardship, economic vitality, and social responsibility. Together, the collaboration and support we provide one another reinforces the demonstrated commitment of businesses in West Michigan to the triple-bottom line. The forum provides us with an unparalleled networking opportunity as well as a support system of unique, talented, driven people with a common passion.

It is through each one of us, the individual and organizational forum members, uniquely and collectively, that the forum is able to perform its work. It is through our continued efforts in sustainability, in the support of business growth and development, that we will sustain our presence in West Michigan, and our region’s stature as a leader in sustainable business. Thank you all for your support and continued efforts in making our past, present, and future a success.

Carol Parsaca
President, West Michigan Sustainable Business Forum
With the rise of the modern environmental movement in the second half of the last century, the nation began to take notice of the negative impact of certain business practices on the natural environment and human health. Regulations followed. In West Michigan, largely spared the malicious actions that gave rise to the activist movement, local businesses were forced to reconsider and often account for actions that had been routine and commonly accepted. Some reacted with animosity, making industry the many-headed villain of the environmental activist.

Others were more pragmatic, becoming proactive, even principled. Adjustments in practices, systems, and equipment to comply with regulations could be a large financial cost. Aiming beyond compliance toward more sustainable business practices could limit the risk of future regulations, and in many instances provide economic value back to the organization.

A select group was taking it even further, experiencing personal revelations about the role of business in environmental and social concerns. Emboldened by a West Michigan culture that prioritizes natural resources and the well-being of employees and the community, pockets of very forward thinking emerged locally, parallel to national efforts by large environmental organizations to organize corporate partnerships.

“New regulations affected many companies back then. They found out that they had unintentionally created a lot of unknown liabilities for themselves. A lot of people were struggling to figure out how to get ahead of the curve so that we wouldn’t be playing catch-up.”

—Tom Fehsenfeld, Crystal Flash

West Michigan Sustainable Business Forum provided a platform for business, government and environmental activists to collaborate on key issues.
One such forward-thinking professional, Bill Stough, held a seat on the board of West Michigan Environmental Action Council, the organization that led the charge locally for increased environmental regulation through the 60s and 70s.

With the concept of a collaborative effort between West Michigan leaders in mind, Stough approached the WMEAC board with a proposal for a subsidiary organization comprised of businesses with an interest in collaborating on business practices that were more environmentally and socially responsible.

“As I talked to people on the WMEAC board, the idea came up—why don’t we spin off a group within WMEAC? To my great surprise, the board passed it.”

“I think the idea that businesses and environmentalists cannot work together has been disproven.” — David Rinald, Steelcase
Twelve original founding members agreed to join, each putting forward $1,500 to establish a financial base for the fledgling organization. Early meetings between members featured the sharing of best practices and sustainable business techniques, as well as lengthy discussions about what direction the newly-formed “forum” should take. It was long, hard work.

Through it all there was a common thread: This forum should help organizations balance its impacts on people, planet and profit, the Triple Bottom Line. Members would focus on environmental concerns, but also on the impact their businesses and their efforts were having on their communities and society. Of course, any efforts undertaken by the group had to be financially feasible as well, preferably increasing the profitability of an organization.

“The ability to have a collective impact is something that this community does very well—there’s a collaborative spirit and a learning mentality.”

—Deborah Steketee, Aquinas College

The original members of West Michigan Sustainable Business Forum were first-generation sustainable business practitioners. There was no literature for sustainable industry. What little there was on the subject focused primarily on agriculture. With no best practices available, they began to create their own. Forum members were self-educated and entrepreneurial. They also put competitive differences aside to pursue common goals, as the forum played a key role.
in facilitating the office furniture industry adoption of sustainable business practices. Informal knowledge sharing at forum meetings has quietly produced countless environmental and social outcomes for the region.

Work groups formed to attack key issue areas over the years, most prevalently the lack of a general entry tool for sustainable business understanding. Over the course of many months a cross-functional team of volunteers produced what would become the most impactful product of the organization, the Concise Guide to Sustainable Commerce. Commonly known as the Self-Assessment Guide, it allowed businesses from diverse industries to take a look at their practices, establish benchmarks and areas for improvement in sustainability, and measure improvement over time. The comprehensive guide proved to be a significant development-tracking tool for West Michigan and beyond: commercial development groups across the nation adopted the format for their own industry-specific self assessment guides as sustainable development grew in relevance through the past two decades. A guidebook for sustainable design followed, “Designing Products with Sustainable Attributes,” with an effort focused on affordable housing, “My Healthy Green Home,” some years later.

“We were that early in adopting these concepts. Our little old West Michigan forum was turning out stuff as good or better than what anybody else had going on.”

–Thomas Newhouse, TJN Design

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Of course the flagship forum program has always been its monthly meetings and annual conferences. The forum has offered approximately 250 professional development events in its history, educating thousands on best practices, emerging issues, and innovative thinking, playing host to a who’s who of national scale experts, including both local talent and global name brands such as industrial ecology pioneer Ray Anderson, sustainable design innovator and Cradle-to-Cradle leader Bill McDonough, biomimicry expert Janine Benyus, and renowned environmental scientist Amory Lovins.

As the West Michigan Sustainable Business Forum began to develop its programming and efforts, its impact was felt through West Michigan’s industrial cultures, especially in the fields of sustainable design and green building. The region’s sustainability claims and green bona fides are well known. The forum deserves credit for making it acceptable, even mainstream, for local businesses and government to pursue such efforts.

The forum serves many different roles. There are the speakers and the knowledge. The work group projects. For some it is a networking venue, a means to meet peers, vendors or potential clients. But ultimately, the largest value of the forum through its first 20 years has likely been its ability to bring together disparate interests from business, government, education, and the non-profit world.

“One of the things we have to be proud of in West Michigan is that we were a real pioneer in initiating this dialogue between traditional environmentalists and the business community,” said Mark LaCroix, a long-time forum member and past president. “That wasn’t very common.”
While the forum is celebrating its 20th Anniversary this year, in many ways it is still a start-up. The continuously evolving nature of sustainable business has forced the organization to regularly adapt its programming to stay relevant. Today there is a wide range of sustainable business interests and practitioners, both in terms of industry and level of expertise.

Where once the forum was largely populated by manufacturers and traditional polluting industries, its membership now ranges from breweries to landfill operators to architects to ArtPrize. Where the forum was once a platform for self-discovery, it is now a marketplace of ideas, discussion and problem-solving around sustainable business for diverse and sometimes competing interests.

The forum still serves the sustainability novice, but it also must meet the needs of the generation of practitioners and organizations that have built their careers or altered business models in pursuit of sustainability, not to mention the emerging third generation that has been specifically trained to focus on life cycle thinking and whole-systems thinking. Member colleges are producing students with skill sets customized to sustainable business. We are working to provide more customized resources to a wider audience, increasing linkages between members and generating conspicuous business outcomes for those involved.

The modern forum still serves as a mechanism for professional development, networking and tribe-building for practitioners and organizations, but it is becoming more and more a platform for investments in shared capacity to address organizational, industry and community sustainability concerns. It is growing into its role as a “boundary organization” providing linkages between industries, governments, non-profit interests, and academia.

This renewed focus is seen readily in its recent Sustainable Business Practice Benchmarking Initiative and new Waste Task Force, both of which are funded by grants from the Department of Environmental Quality. Another key project is the Climate Resiliency Framework Initiative, a partnership with Michigan State University and Penn State University designed to help local organizations respond to climate change and similar concerns, such as resource scarcity. Other key initiatives include a new focus on sustainable food systems and diversity.

It has only been five years since the forum branched off from WMEAC, which served as a fiduciary sponsor for 16 years, and the organization is again starting to catch its stride. It hired its first full-time staff person last year, and is now ramping up for growth, with program revenue doubling year-over-year, event attendance more than doubling. New work groups are driving innovative and important ideas. New members and a new generation of member representatives are becoming fast leaders.

It is a exciting time to be involved with WMSBF. An exciting time for sustainable business in West Michigan.
This yearly honor recognizes the company that best represents the values of the triple-bottom line as defined by the mission of West Michigan Sustainable Business Forum. Through a blind vote, the WMSBF Board of Directors culled a list of 27 nominees to the five finalists below. The winner was chosen by a vote of forum members. It will be announced at the 2014 Triple Bottom Line Bash.

**Amway**
Amway is one of the world’s largest direct selling businesses. Founded in 1959, Amway’s focus has been on helping people reach their potential. Through corporate social responsibility efforts, business opportunities, brands, and products, Amway’s goal has been to help improve the lives of others. Through global social programs, such as the Amway One by One Campaign, and engagement with international NGOs, Amway reaches out and provides support to people across the world.

**Cascade Engineering**
Cascade Engineering has worked diligently over the past decade to create a strategy focused on sustainability that propels our innovation and sets forth our future direction. In fact, the company’s purpose as defined by its employees is to make a positive impact on society, the environment and to be financially successful. As one of the largest certified “B” corporations in the world, Cascade Engineering is a nationally recognized proponent of sustainable business practices that emphasize the key role business can play in building financial, social and environmental capital.

**Herman Miller**
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**Organicycle**
Organicycle began in 2011 to provide organic waste recycling services to businesses and residents interested in ditching the dump, and incorporating zero-waste practices in the home or in their business. Through an affordable, weekly curbside service, Organicycle replaces commercial and residential trash by offering single stream organic waste collection that accepts 100% of food, yard, paper and pet waste.
This lifetime achievement award honors individual practitioners that have made the greatest contribution to sustainable business in West Michigan during their careers. Finalists are selected by blind vote of the WMSBF board of directors. Winners are then selected by a vote of the full forum membership. Two or three individuals currently active in the West Michigan will be selected for recognition each year. One additional individual no longer active due to retirement or relocation will also be honored.

The other finalists were:

RENAE HESSELINK, Nichols

TOM NEWHOUSE, TJN Design

DAVE RINARD, Steelcase

DEB STEKETEE, Aquinas College

They will automatically be on the ballot for 2015.

Portraits by Shannon Mack.
West Michigan Sustainable Business Forum is funded through a combination of membership donations, grants, program fees and sponsorships. We provide three regular opportunities for members and other local organizations to sponsor our activities each year.

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And all of our many committee volunteers.
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Membership in West Michigan Sustainable Business Forum is on an annual, calendar year basis. Membership dues fund the vast majority of the forum’s work. Members receive a profile page on wmsbf.org, access to special educational and networking opportunities, the ability to promote events and happenings through our blog and newsletter, voting rights and more. Dues are a donation tax deductible to the fullest extent of the law.

1-2 employees........................................ $60
3-10 employees...................................... $150
11-100 employees................................. $300
101 – 1,000 employees......................... $500
1,000 employees or more...................... $750
At Large (no company affiliation)........ $50
Student............................................... $20

Learn more about joining at wmsbf.org/membership.
Regular WMSBF Monthly Membership Meetings occur on the second Monday of each month with some exceptions. A complete schedule of upcoming events can be found at:

wmsbf.org/events

Learn more about West Michigan Sustainable Business Forum at:

wmsbf.org