

## Valuing Social Justice in the Triple-Bottom Line

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Issues that impact the economy are front and center in today's news and information. It's not difficult to link the economy to a sustainable future. Addressing issues that impact the environment is often the most obvious way to impact the Triple Bottom Line (TBL). But where does that put social justice in the conversation and how do we give equal weight to its importance in the TBL?

The key might be in considering a broad TBL framework for all decisions and conversations. Whether you are planning for your business, your faith community or while practicing environmental stewardship it is critical to think about all three elements of TBL in every decision. The following questions\* can help you as you make decisions to benefit the TBL:

**Economy:** How does this decision support our local economy now and in the long-term?

**Environment:** How does this decision impact the ability of our natural systems to support our grandchildren's grandchildren?

**Social Justice:** Is this decision being made by an inclusive group of our community's stakeholders? And will it benefit all people?

Not every part of the TBL will have the same weight in every decision, but it is important to ask the three questions.

Below illustrates how two regional organizations have incorporated all elements of TBL.

In 2008 and 2009, [Comprenew Environmental](#) (a Grand Rapids based nonprofit) partnered with a number of community organizations, businesses and citizens to execute environmentally responsible recycling of electronic waste such as used computers. The electronics are refurbished and resold with the remainder of the materials being sold for scrap and/or repurposing. Saturday collection events sponsored by many West Michigan partners including: East Paris Business Association, John Ball Park Zoo, Ionia County, Wal-Mart, Montcalm County, Muskegon Community College, Grand Valley State University, Haworth, Herman Miller and West Michigan Creation Care. In the past two-years, this program has kept more than 272,000 pounds of electronic waste out of landfills. At the Comprenew recycling center, they incorporate social justice into their bottom line by providing training and work opportunities (disassembly, sorting, processing, equipment testing), to community partners, including Hope Network, West Michigan Hispanic Center, AARP, and Kent County Juvenile Court.

\* Questions adapted from the 3E's Initiative in the Greater Holland/Zeeland area.

Social Justice can be the driver of a project too. In Project Light Change, the West Michigan Environmental Action Council (WMEAC) received a grant to distribute 25,000 compact fluorescent bulbs (CFLs) and related educational materials in five communities in West Michigan. After a very successful distribution of 5,000 CFLs in Grand Haven, WMEAC targeted Holland for its next event. West Michigan Creation Care (WMCC), an interdenominational group from area churches and worship centers, was the local partner for distribution. WMCC chose to have a strong emphasis on social justice by distributing the CFLs to low-income households. They completely retrofitted several homes and distributed the remaining bulbs and materials through local social agencies that provide assistance to people with few financial resources. Support for this project also came from the WMSA-Green Infrastructure for assisting in acquiring funds from the Holland Board of Public Works, the City of Holland/Our Street Program and other Social Service Agents.

Although the original motivation for the Project Light Change events was energy conservation and environmental stewardship, WMCC felt that social justice was their responsibility. This resulted in helping people with the least amount of resources to implement environmental best practices and to gain financial rewards through savings on utilities.

How will you consider each element of the TBL when you are making your decisions? Each decision is unique and not all parts of TBL will have the same weight when you ask how it relates to the TBL, but asking the questions may lead to new “win-win” ideas for benefitting economic prosperity, environmental integrity and social justice.

For additional information about working toward sustainability and creating a positive Triple Bottom Line, the West Michigan Strategic Alliance can help. And there are many organizations in West Michigan focused on the TBL that can provide more information including: [W.M. Sustainable Business Forum](#); the [W.M. Regional Sustainability Group](#); the [Muskegon Area Sustainability Coalition](#); the [Grand Rapids Community Sustainability Partnership](#); Northwest Ottawa Sustainability Coalition and the [3E's](#).

### **About the West Michigan Green Infrastructure Initiative**

The West Michigan Green Infrastructure Initiative mission is to encourage regional collaboration and translate best practices in green infrastructure planning to decision-makers and communities, creating, enhancing and protecting a sustainable green infrastructure network throughout West Michigan. To learn more about the West Michigan Green Infrastructure Initiative, visit the WMSA website at: [www.wm-alliance.org](http://www.wm-alliance.org) or contact Ken Freestone, Green Infrastructure Project Manger, at 616.871.2450 or [Kfreestone@wm-alliance.org](mailto:Kfreestone@wm-alliance.org).

### **About the West Michigan Strategic Alliance**

The West Michigan Strategic Alliance serves as a catalyst for regional collaboration among the businesses, institutions and governmental units serving more than 1.3 million people living in a eight-county region including: Allegan, Barry, Ionia, Kent, Montcalm, Muskegon, Newaygo and Ottawa. The Alliance works to encourage a regional mindset, which will foster collaboration on critical issues that impact how we live, learn, work and play. Additional information is available at [www.wm-alliance.org](http://www.wm-alliance.org).