



Tim Doeg (red shirt) outside his house with some of his neighbours, Barbara Ladd, David Cunnington, Billy Noonan and Peter Appelman with his children Hannah and Noah.

How green is your alley?

With communities sharing skills and resources all around Victoria, sustainability streets are the way forward, writes **Lisa Mitchell**.

PICTURES EDDIE JIM

If you have to make a "grudge purchase" such as a lawn mower, then at least choosing an environmentally friendly one may relieve the sting or, as Sue Sheehan and partner Haydn Chiron decided to do, ask neighbours to chip in, reduce the cost and share the resource. The couple are part of Sustainability Street, a program run by entrepreneurial environment education company Vox Bandicoot in conjunction with councils, community groups and schools. So far, about 140 streets around Melbourne are participating and reporting reductions up

to 75% in water, waste and energy use around the home. "Sustainability Streets" can be individual streets, or geographically or socially connected groups of people. Another 60 are operating in NSW, with communities in Western Australia and South Australia planned for 2008 and the idea percolating as far away as Scotland and China. "There's a lot of fear and worry about what's happening in the world, especially with climate change, and that's not a great state of mind to live with," says Sheehan, who lives

in Sumner Estate, Northcote. "What Sustainability Street does, is it replaces the consumerist ideology and culture with something that's positive." Sumner Estate covers about 300 households and seven streets in a pastoral pocket bounded by St Georges Road, Arthurton Road and Merri Creek. Residents became involved after Vox Bandicoot held a community meeting on its Sustainability Street Approach (SSA) in 2006. Eighteen months later, up to 60 residents have joined activities. There's a craft group that makes enough gifts to welcome babies with

crocheted caps and felt toys for months to come, and an email list linked to a website on which people spread the word about fruit trees proffering apricots and lemons, and orphan items that might enjoy more familiar homes than second-hand retailers. Since moving into (Sustainability Street) Walton Avenue, in Preston, Susan Rennie and her partner, Kate Coghlan, have made soap, bottled olives and joined bulk orders of organic compost and mulch. "We wanted to do more sustainable vegetable gardening in the street and started a veggie swapping

From page 19

program ... We've got seven chickens and we've swapped eggs with other people's excess produce, like silverbeet," says Rennie. The first Sustainability Street started in Coburg in 2001, and Berry Street, Reynard Street, Deakin Street, Ewen Street even barter in wine, laughs resident Jason Cox, whose community uncovered a surprising repository of skills to share. "We did a skills audit," says Cox. "When we came to one Greek grandmother, she said she had no skills but the nuclear physicist said, 'You're the best veggie gardener in Coburg.' And someone else said, 'You pickle all your vegies, too!' Just to see her sense of self-esteem swell; she hadn't realised she was a valuable member of the community."

The groups need to be self-sustaining and generally appoint rotating co-ordinators to shimmy things along. Sheehan says that some people will always be more active than others, it's a matter of acknowledging that people become involved in things that interest them most. Over time, says Cox, the nature of neighbourhood relationships change and the SSA becomes less formal, yet more regular, too.

"I crashed my bicycle this week," says Cox. "Ross down the street knows about bikes, he fixes my bike, we talk about a new solar panel that's coming out ... when someone's renovating their house, you talk to them about what features they're going to put in ... it's become this ongoing thing that is part of the community, as opposed to something the community does. It's a lifestyle."

Where councils support a Sustainability Street, Vox Bandicoot provides a six-month training period of information nights around four stages: Mulch (learn), Sow (plan), Grow (do) and Harvest (teach the wider community).

One property developer, the Seasons Group, is using the SSA as a framework for its new housing estate in Tarnet, says David Seignior, a Vox Bandicoot director. And people are beginning to identify the streets as places they'd like to live, creating cachet for the area. Cox knows at least one family who were encouraged to buy into his area because of its eco-friendly status.

Cox, who works with the Moreland



THE OLD-FASHIONED WAY

It takes Jason Cox (above) 20 minutes to walk down his street for all the friendly chitchat he attracts. The Coburg resident says the greatest benefit by far of the Sustainability Street program is the way communities learn to sustain themselves on so many unexpected practical and social levels.

"I've been in this street for 10 years and the first five years, I probably knew two or three houses," says Cox. "Now I know about 20." Tim Doeg, of Union Street, Northcote, says people care more about each other and watch out for each other. Participants are breaking down fences — literally in one case in Keilor East — to revive neighbourly attitudes. "You do things for people you wouldn't have done before," says Doeg. "You need to overcome the fear of knocking on the door of someone you don't know. I knew about 20 people, now it's probably 50. The other 30 were just nodding acquaintances and some have turned into good friends."

For Sue Sheehan, who has a new baby, the assistance arrives often and "out of the blue". Where other people call upon family members many suburbs away, or professional assistance, Sheehan's neighbours come to each other's aid. Her neighbours created a meal roster when she returned home with her new baby; others took her older children to the park to give everyone a break. "Just having people come and have a cup of tea and hold the baby while I do some dishes, or they do the dishes (is great)," says Sheehan. "A motivation for me is creating building blocks for a positive future for kids, so they're not doing things the way we were doing them, which created the problem in the first place."

Energy Foundation, co-ordinates the most ambitious SSA yet — a joint effort by Vox Bandicoot, the Northern Alliance for Greenhouse Action (NARGA) and the foundation to launch 18 communities in the municipalities of Moreland, Darebin, Whittlesea and the City of Melbourne. So far, 12 are up and running. As word of mouth spreads, group members are often invited to other suburbs to speak about their experiences.

While the initiatives that bubble between neighbours at street parties and barbecues may not seem substantial — a light bulb exchange, food co-ops, open-house days — the ripple effect is wide and deep. Susan Rennie, for example, is corralling a local high school experiencing vandalism into a mosaic-tiling project at the local playground to create "a greater sense of place and ownership".

"It's also about the power of acting as a community to some extent," says Rennie, whose community recently rallied against a new mobile phone tower, and lobbied the council for better tree-planting on its nature strips.

Tim Doeg of Union Street, Northcote, says people generally offer similar excuses for not having adopted sustainable living practices: they don't have time to do the research; they don't know what to do; and they think it's going to be expensive.

Doeg organised a water audit for 46 houses in his street at a cost of \$3000, sponsored largely by local traders. As a result, eight people installed water tanks and many more introduced \$8 flow-reducers into their taps and four-minute shower timers. Now Doeg's water tank is overflowing.

"There have been two big rain storms in the last month and each of those filled up our tank," says Doeg. "It basically overflowed, and it hasn't been empty since we put it in, in February. We've reduced our water use by 75% through a whole series of little changes: the flow reducers, the low-flow shower head, the efficient front-loader when our top-loading wash machine died."

Cox says that holding open-house days has really increased the "ah-ha, so that's how you do it!" conversion factor. Often people just need to see how abundant a low-flow shower head can be, or how a rainwater bladder under the house works, or how passive solar systems can be used.

Dr Colin Hocking, a senior research fellow with the Institute for Sustainability and Innovation at Victoria University, is halfway through a three-year, independent evaluation of the SSA for Vox Bandicoot. He already believes the SSA is on track to create long-term change to sustainable living practices.

"People feel like they've got the information and practical support they need to make the changes, so they feel capable, and that the changes are acceptable. They say things like, 'If all of your friends are doing it, it makes you feel like you can do it, too.' Certainly a lot of people are making large-scale changes far and above what they originally expected to do ... and I'm confident that the detailed figures on water and greenhouse gases will reflect that."

voxbandicoot.com.au/sustainability-street.html

DIRTY ABOUT CLEANING?

DON'T BE.

Wash at home again with this portable, water-friendly 12V pressure washer. No messing around with buckets or extension leads. Great for cars, boats, windows, whatever. Fill Car Cube® with tankwater, plug into 12V and go!

Available from Autobarn.

www.carcube.com.au or (02) 9212 5255

“We've got seven chickens and we've swapped eggs with other people's excess produce, like silverbeet.”

SUSTAINABILITY STREET RESIDENT SUSAN RENNIE

