

March 12

A small group of thoughtful citizens

Linda Woods is one of those rare people who practices what she preaches.



**REPORTING
ASIDE**
Amy Calder

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She recycles.

She doesn't use a clothes dryer.

She hasn't taken a plastic bag from a store in years, and when she has multiple errands to run, she makes one trip into town and does them all.

"I'm not absolutely opposed to bottled water, but I don't have it, don't serve it."

Woods was speaking from her tiny office at Waterville City Hall which actually is the recycling closet. Her office mates are garbage bags full of shredded paper and cardboard boxes that start piling up at the beginning of the month and by the end, she can just about get through the door.

"I love my decor," she said, and means it.

Woods, of Oakland, is coordinator for Sustain Mid-Maine Coalition, a grassroots group that focuses on conserving resources, sustaining a healthy environment and promoting economic

prosperity in Waterville, Winslow, Fairfield and Oakland.

Sustain Mid-Maine was formed in 2009 after more than 60 people met at the Opera House over three days to discuss what the region should look like in 2020.

The organization operates on a shoestring budget, but has accomplished great things. It has already realized goals it set in 2009:

- Procuring a \$175,000 federal grant to help weatherize and winterize homes in Waterville and Winslow.
- Creating community gardens in Waterville and Oakland (gardens will start in Winslow this spring)
- Helping create Kennebec Explorer, a public transportation van service, in conjunction with Kennebec Valley Community Action Program.

"I am so proud of the accomplishments of this group," says Woods, a petite woman with short blonde hair who has a sharp sense of humor — and boundless energy.

"I am the only paid employee. I work 15 hours a week. Everyone else is a volunteer. We use no city money, no public money — it's all private grants I've written. I want to get the word out about what we're doing and get people to join up and help if they want to."

Woods' small salary so far has come from an anonymous donor. The funds will run out in April, but she keeps her fingers crossed that she'll keep her job.

She has 150 volunteers on her mailing list, writes a newsletter and talks to school kids about recycling, among other duties.

"I stand on my head, pretty much. Whatever they tell me to do. It's only at the grassroots level where things can happen. There's a Margaret Mead quote that I absolutely love: 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.' It's very important, because if people don't do what they can — if we don't protect it, who will?"

Convincing more people to recycle at the local recycling facility is just one project she's pushing.

"What we want to see is curbside recycling, but there's no money for that. We're trying to get more signs made for the current recycling facility that are clear, telling the average person how to sort."

She urges people to come to Green Bean Movie Scene, 4:30-8 p.m. March 25 at Carter Hall at Kennebec Valley Community College in Fairfield, hosted by Sustain Mid-Maine and Starbucks. The free evening of environmental films will include coffee and treats that people can buy, with all proceeds to benefit Sustain Mid-Maine.

She plans to invite 60 people to her 60th birthday party in July and ask them to bring, instead of gifts, donations for Sustain Mid-Maine, Humane Society Waterville Area and the Evening Sandwich Program at the Waterville Universalist Unitarian Church.

"I don't need stuff. I've got stuff coming out of my ears. I like people. I'm a chatterbox. I love to be the center of attention, and this is a chance to do that."

Woods is a retired 36-year teacher who taught English 23 years at Lawrence High School in Fairfield. While there, she helped create Gang Green, an environmental club for which she remains a volunteer.

Her passion goes back much farther than that, to a time when she was growing up on a farm in Benton and wrote an essay for her eighth-grade class, opposing the building of houses on farmland — her playground.

"I've been an environmental rabble-rouser for a long time," she says, smiling.

Amy Calder has been a Sentinel reporter 23 years. Her column appears here Saturdays. She may be reached at acalder@centralmaine.com.

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