

# UNDERSTANDING THE TRIPLE BOTTOM LINE AND APPLYING IT TO YOUR PROGRAM

By L. Dennis Burns, CAPP

Sustainability still means many different things to different people and groups. The term “triple bottom line” has emerged as a helpful phrase for what most mean when incorporating the principles of sustainability within institutional planning frameworks; it refers to the effects that sustainable business practices can have on people, planet, and profit.

While most people have absorbed a lot of information regarding general principles related to sustainability, many are not as familiar with the triple bottom line. At its core, it is a way to measure an organization’s effect on people, the environment, and its finances. Some organizations find that using this approach helps them improve the way they treat people within and outside their organizations, and helps mitigate adverse effects on the environment.

## Parking and Transportation Context

Within a parking and/or transportation program context, the following are a few examples that might relate to the three core elements.

### Effects on People

- Improved parking technology creates an enhanced customer experience. This includes multiple payment options, better information availability, new services, and customer benefits.
- Improved wayfinding, signage, and program branding. This leads to fewer vehicle miles traveled while searching for parking, less parker frustration, and enhanced program recognition and reputation.
- Improved commute options and embracing the connected traveler concept. We see greater mode choices, enhanced quality of life for all citizens, and less reliance on single-occupant vehicles.
- Excellent communications and collaborative public processes: greater diversity of opinion, a better informed/educated public, and enhanced societal sustainability.
- Improved community quality of life, including a cleaner environment, reduced congestion, promotion of healthy lifestyles, and reduced negative environmental effects.

### Effects on the Planet

- Improved community access with reduced single-occupant vehicle mode share.
- Increased use of the 3Rs (reduce, reuse, recycle) by institutions and individuals.

- Increased upcycling (the process of converting waste materials or useless products into new materials or products of better quality or higher environmental value).
- Reduced vehicular idling and queuing times.
- Increased use of alternative energy sources.

### Effects on Profit

- A more balanced perspective regarding operating costs and reduced life cycle costs.
- Improved and diversified tax bases.
- Reduced vacancy rates and accompanying enhanced property values.
- Increased business activity and growth.

### Developing a System

The following are some thoughts on initiating a triple bottom line philosophy in your own organization:

- Divide the organization’s bottom line into three categories: social, environmental, and economic. Represent each category in terms of benefits and costs. Calculate net income using traditional accounting methods to represent the the first of the three bottom lines.
- Analyze the organization’s environmental effects based on its use of renewable and non-renewable resources for the second bottom line.
- Calculate the flow of these resources based on the organization’s annual operations with the goal of reducing the use of non-renewable resources.
- Establish the percentage of alternative fuels used by dividing the cost of alternative fuels by overall fuel use. Change management practices so there is a focus on increased use of alternative fuels.
- Evaluate the organization’s social effect based on its involvement with the local community. Evaluate organization-driven community programs by establishing the number of people or programs the organization helps in the community. Create a goal to increase these numbers or positively affect community change.

Now it’s your turn! Imagine what changes adopting a triple bottom line approach might mean for your organization, staff, customers, and community. **P**



**L. DENNIS BURNS,** CAPP, is senior practice builder/regional vice president with Kimley-Horn and Associates, and a member of IPI’s Sustainability Committee. He can be reached at [dennis.burns@kimley-horn.com](mailto:dennis.burns@kimley-horn.com) or 602.906.1125.