Sustainable: Attainable?

(Or, Natural Resource-Based Planning by Any Other Name Would Smell as Sweet...)

Well, now that we've attracted your attention with the latest buzzword, we have a confession to make: NEMO doesn't know the answer to the question posed by the title of this essay! (If this does not surprise you, go right to the head of the class.) In fact, like most of you out there—*c'mon, admit it*—we're not even sure what "sustainability" really means.

One thing we do know is that it currently *de rigeur* to include it in your latest grant proposal, preferably sandwiched between "stakeholders" and "capacity building." Hey, we could go on all day, but vilification of buzzwords, while great fun, is not what this SOAPBOX is about (but keep checking back...).

A true assessment of sustainability requires an understanding of interwoven global economy and ecology that we doubt even exists at this point. However, as bandied about these days, the topic—identified by terms like "compatible development," "sustainable communities," "smart growth," and even "sympathetic development" (!)—is a little more graspable.

At the local level, we believe that NEMO's emphasis on ***natural resource-based planning*** is a reasonable facsimile of these terms, and a lot easier to define. Growth must be planned. Often it isn't. And even where growth *is* planned, the overwhelming *modus operandi* is traditional development-oriented planning. Areas suitable for development are identified based upon logistic factors like accessibility to roads, utility lines, and other infrastructure. Often, the entire community is designated suitable, the only differentiation being the particular uses and densities allowed in given areas. Areas not meeting these criteria are labeled "unsuitable for development" and left at that. Natural resources are simply not factored in, unless they pose a barrier to development (for instance, in states regulating development in wetlands).

Natural resource-based planning, on the other hand, starts with a community's natural resource base and works "backward" to development potential. This approach begins with conducting a natural resources inventory, so that a community knows what it has. It then requires some form of prioritizing of those resources as a community, recognizing that not all natural resources can be protected. Then, community plans and regulations must direct development to the areas most suited for it, ensuring minimal impact on priority natural resources through the location, design, and engineering of new development.

This is a proactive approach to "sustainability." It isn't new or particularly innovative, but it isn't common, either—it just isn't how people have been trained to approach planning in America. Many local plans, in fact, specifically avoid labeling areas as "suitable for preservation," because local decision makers confuse planning with land use regulation, or fear landowner backlash from such designations.

However, our feeling is that attitudes are changing—largely because natural resource-based planning can protect a lot more than natural resources. As folks are starting to realize, the development-oriented, transportation-based approach is great for building towns that are truly comfortable, accommodating places to live—*if you're a minivan*. As for humans, well, asphalt jungles, sprawled subdivisions, one-design-fits-all mini-marts and curbs stretching to the horizon are not ideal for fostering a sense of community. In other words, bad planning and design impoverishes both the natural and the human landscapes, which then have lasting negative impacts on economic stability and quality of life.

These days, Baby Boomers are constantly being chided that in their headlong careening through life, they are too busy paying bills and balancing the checkbook to plan for a comfortable (read: sustainable) retirement. Our communities suffer from the same syndrome. In the press of reviewing development proposals and worrying about a 10-acre wetland here or a 10-job boost there, they are not taking the time to plan for their community's long-term viability—economic, environmental or human.

Is sustainability attainable? Who knows! But natural resource-based planning can help us to do a lot better.

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