

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: IT'S MORE THAN JUST BEING "GREEN"

By Todd J. Poole, President, 4ward Planning LLC

Increased media attention concerning global warming, our country's over reliance on fossil fuels and the degradation of our natural resources over the past decade has raised greater public awareness and action concerning the consequences of our everyday activities. Read any national public opinion poll of the last few years and environmental protection is sure to be among the top issues cited. Fortune 1000 companies, news magazines and Hollywood have done their part, as well, pushing consumer products, feature stories and films, respectively, designed to raise awareness about the fragility of our environment. Indeed, this movement has grown so large that it has introduced a number of new terms into our every day vocabulary – "*Carbon Footprint*" (a measure of the our impact on the environment, in terms of the amount of greenhouse gases produced, measured in units of carbon dioxide.), "*Grey Water*" (waste water that does not contain sewage or fecal contamination (such as from the shower) and can be reused for irrigation after filtration), "*Light pollution*" (environmental pollution consisting of the excess of harmful or annoying light), and "*Renewable energy*" (alternative energy sources such as wind power or solar energy that can keep producing energy indefinitely without being used up).

"*Green*" and "*Sustainable*" are two terms that have been used interchangeably within the last decade to refer to good environmental practices. The first of these terms has much to do with the symbolism it connotes – trees, parkland, plants, healthfulness, etc. In fact, the term, "*Green*," as it has come to be used today seems to have much more to do with a desired environmental status or outcome than with a spectrum color. "*Green*" has even gained a hip factor within political and entertainment circles with an increasing number of elected officials and film stars closely aligning themselves with high profile environmental causes (Google "*Sting*" and "*rainforest*," for example).

The second of these terms, "*Sustainable*," has come to be used synonymously for "*Green*" and is generally understood as to maintain something over time without degrading or diminishing it. *Sustainability* has been used, for example, to refer to such energy conservation practices as natural "*day-lighting*" and "*grey water*" usage. These and other good conservation practices are routinely being incorporated into many real estate development projects, as they are proving financially rewarding in addition to being eco friendly. However, while "*Green*" practices and techniques should certainly be made part of all real estate development projects, "*Sustainable Development*" should not be confused with "*Green*" or environmentally friendly real estate development, per se.

What is "*Sustainable Development*?"

The term "*Sustainable Development*," officially coined in the 1987 report of the Bruntland Commission, formally the World Commission on Environment and Development and created by the United Nations General Assembly, defined the term as development that "*meets the needs of the present generation*

without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” While the precise meaning of this definition has since been debated by politicians, academics and activists throughout the world, there is general consensus “Sustainable Development” refers to the balancing of three interrelated systems – environment, social and economic. We, knowingly and unknowingly, influence the conditions of these systems by acting on our everyday wants and needs; in turn, we are influenced by the resulting conditions (good and bad) of these systems in a never ending cycle. Some examples are all too familiar:

Public officials in well-off community welcome the development of a regional shopping center on the edge of town, coveting the large numbers of jobs and new tax revenues the development will represent. The relatively low-wage jobs created (and existing zoning densities), however, will not permit these workers to afford quality housing in close proximity to the shopping center.

A large suburban office park is developed off an interstate highway, bringing hundreds of new white collar jobs and significant tax revenues to the local jurisdiction. Given the lack of public transit to the site and a zoning ordinance prohibiting mixed-use development, the office park’s employees generate far higher vehicle miles travelled (and carbon emissions) accessing retail and residential offerings than might be otherwise.

In response to rapid residential and commercial development (sprawl), county residents put forward and approve an open space referendum raising millions of dollars to acquire developable land. As the effort was disconnected from current and long-term regional housing needs, the distribution and financing associated with future affordable housing development will be more challenging than might be otherwise.

The above represent but a few examples of what a “Sustainable Development” strategy tries to avoid – the unintentional improvement of one system (e.g., the local economy) at the expense of another (e.g., social equity). What may be most responsible for these outcomes are land-use strategies developed absent the thinking or participation of a broad range of practitioners – land planners, socio-economic professionals, environmental scientists, urban designers, and transportation planners. As we are becoming increasingly aware, such an approach will almost always fall short of achieving the desired outcome of comprehensive “Sustainable Development” found within the upper right quadrant of Figure 1.

Sustainable Development is as Difficult to Define as it is to Achieve

It is easy to understand how “Sustainable Development” is used interchangeably with “Green Development,” given how readily society has grasped the benefits of energy conservation practices and environmental stewardship. It is far less easy, however, to link “Sustainable Development” with issues concerning inclusionary or workforce housing, adequate public transit service and access to full-service supermarkets, as these are far more

complex societal issues. The difference is not necessarily surprising, given the general acceptance of energy conservation and environmental stewardship as beneficial to most of society – *cleaner air to breathe, purer water to drink and more natural resources to experience*. Not so easily accepted is how

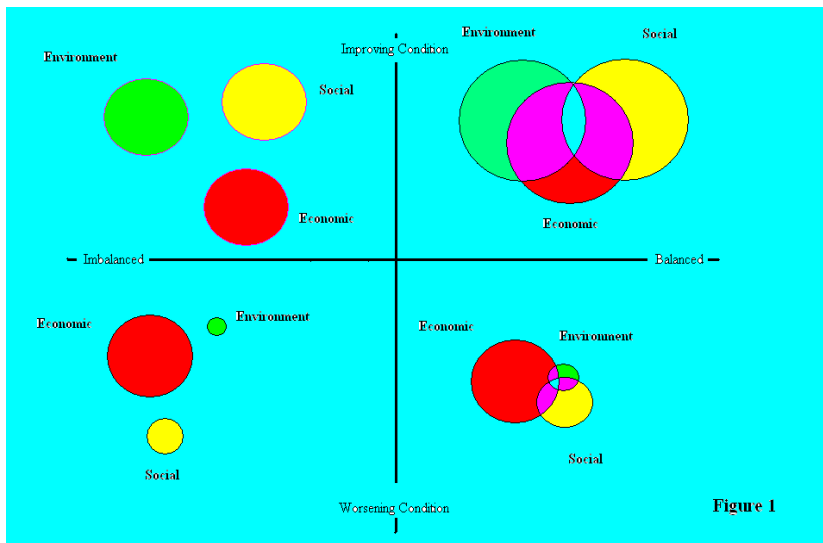
permitting increased housing density on a land parcel may facilitate more working class families the chance to live closer to their places of employment; or how increased public transit options may allow low- and moderate-income families an opportunity to spend a greater share of their income on food, shelter and healthcare, and less on automobile related expenses.

True “Sustainable Development” is about achieving improved social, environmental, fiscal and economic conditions for host communities and regions through sound land-use policies and laws. This will require effort beyond conventional land planning methods of real estate market, transportation and land use studies.

“Sustainable Development” must entail greater examination of local and state policies concerning the linkages (or lack thereof) between land-use, multi-modal transportation, employment, housing, healthcare and childcare. It will also require greater emphasis placed on analyzing a community’s existing and prospective fiscal condition (e.g., its current reliance on real property taxes to fund local services; its debt burden per capita trends, the percentage of tax revenues collected from commercial ratables, etc.),

since a community’s ability to benefit from any newly created development, long-term, is largely dependent on whether that project gives off more revenue (taxes and fees) than it absorbs in municipal services (police, fire, sanitation and schools).

While the current lack of consensus among land-use practitioners concerning what “Sustainable



Development” is and is not is a matter of semantics, planners, architects, urban designers, environmental scientists, economists and developers all have an important role to play in collaborating and establishing general “Sustainable Development” principles for large land-use plans (master, comprehensive and redevelopment plans). Further, all land-use practitioners, elected officials and communities need to be educated as to the importance of and benefits from comprehensive sustainable land-use development – much in the way that land-use professionals and associated stakeholders have come to be educated about the importance and benefits of LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) in building design.

The Value of a Comprehensive Sustainable Land-Use Project Approach

All of a community’s stakeholders – residents, business owners, workers and local public officials – are directly or indirectly impacted by any large land-use plan. Think of this as a change in the value

proposition for each of the community's stakeholders. For some, the altered value proposition is financial (profit to developers and tax revenues and fees to public entities); for others, it is environmental (greater carbon emissions for residents and workers or more parkland for local children); still, for others, it may be an altered social value proposition (provision of affordably priced housing for working class residents or reduction in neighborhood crime through blight removal). Too often the value proposition from a large land-use project means increased value for some and diminished value for others.

A comprehensive sustainable land-use planning approach seeks balanced improvement in the conditions affecting *social, environmental, fiscal and economic systems* by employing an integrated analytical process involving the disciplines of socio-economics, urban planning, environmental science, transportation analysis and urban design.

Achieving comprehensive "*Sustainable Development*" within large scale projects will no doubt be a significant challenge for land-use practitioners for years to come; however, the land-use profession can have no more noble a cause than "*meet[ing] the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*"