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Community values: The secret ingredient to sustaining a vision

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"It is not that you don't need leadership and vision, but success comes from consensus within the community."

-Amanda Burden, New York City Commissioner of City Planning.

The age-old questions of our region are: "What do we want to be when we grow up?" and "What do we want the future of our region to be and how are we going to get there?"

The San Diego region has many visions. It always has. The visions are usually embedded in the general plans for the cities, county, SANDAG and other agencies. The plans focus on land use, but they all recognize that land use relates to economic, social, demographic and cultural issues. Over the last century, we have painted a picture of that vision many times, beginning with the first plans for the city of San Diego and the region in 1908 and 1927 by John Nolen, to the many plans that have been prepared in the 50 years since the end of World War II, to the many efforts that are under way currently.

However, the devil is in the details, and there are plenty of critics of the planning process who argue plans often end up on the shelf or never go beyond the vision to implementation. While these are partly valid criticisms, we would argue that San Diego has been successful implementing at least a portion of our collective visions. Note the development of Balboa Park, the redevelopment of downtown, the reinvention of the single-room-occupancy hotel, the rebuilding of the trolley, the saving of the San Diego River and the Multiple Species Conservation plan, to name a few.

Notwithstanding those achievements, it is true that too often we do not go as far as we can and definitely should. Moreover, as a community, we have not been able to muster enough support for the vision that would enable us, in turn, to raise the funds to implement it. The community will be willing to pay if they are a part of creating that vision and if it touches them at their core. Usually these are quality of life issues, which in the long run can transfer to economic prosperity.

Today, we have visions in our general plans that begin with land use and also reflect the connections with transportation, with public services and facilities and with all those things that contribute to our quality of life. Furthermore, there are many other visions out there -- for health, for safety, for education, et cetera -- and while we recognize the connections between these visions, we don't often build the connections and collaborations that might lead to the consensus for follow through and a more comprehensive implementation for our visions.

One example is the regeneration of Chicago by Mayor Richard M. Daley who in 1989 set forth a goal to replant trees lost to Dutch Elm disease. A May 17 *New York Times* article entitled "To revitalize a city, try spreading some mulch" describes how the tree-planting became the entry to a comprehensive program of "conserving resources, saving energy, expanding parks, constructing environmentally sensitive buildings, reducing the amount of storm water, restoring wetlands, generating renewable energy and doing everything feasible to heal instead of harm the city's natural resources."

The planting of trees became a strategy to make Chicago "America's Greenest City." The endeavor is cited as "improving every conventional category of civic well-being." Kermit the frog must now be saying, "It is easy being green," and in the case of Chicago, green not only represents the color of trees but also the color of money, because this endeavor is creating a new economy.

These organizing principles go beyond bureaucratic city management tools. They tap into values that have deep roots at the community level. This is the absolute key to sustaining a vision. Whether it's a mayor of a city or a CEO of a Fortune 500 company, engagement of its people based on integrated quality of life components rather than pure economics creates a healthy, thriving system.

President Bush, in his State of the Union address earlier this year, struck a chord when he said we are "addicted to oil." Have you noticed that since then the media is focusing more on alternative fuel technology and stories of companies that are re-engineering their businesses to align with that value? President Bush struck a chord that ran deep in the hearts and minds of American citizens and businesses and we ran with it. Those words may be President Bush's legacy and we may look back and discover that those words brought about a revolution that

shifted our economy and lifestyle from wasteful and polluting to sustainable and healthy.

In San Diego, we do have the vision, but we need a broad community consensus. No one is better suited to help us build that consensus than Mayor Jerry Sanders. San Diegans are starving to be engaged beyond the pension deficit. There are dozens of community and civic groups standing by waiting for our leader's clear vision and set of organizing principles. The vision must incorporate connections, consensus and collaboration. This will ultimately lead to a holistic vision supported by the deep roots and values of the citizens of San Diego. We are ready to implement the city of our dreams -- are you?

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