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### Building for Sustainability

## Integrated communities key to economic evolution

By Mary McLellan and Michael Stepner

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*"No neighborhood can be truly livable without retail services, and no metropolitan area can be truly sustainable with rot at its core."*

-- Michael Beyard, ULI Fellow for Retail and Entertainment, Urban Land, *The Forgotten Frontier*

Michael Beyard's quote is music to our ears. What we can infer is that we cannot build a foundation of sustainability in our city when there are components that are failing. This means that we must authentically step into the next phase of city building using holistic models where the social composite of the entire region is a serious consideration when planning for our economic well being. In other words, the Barrio is as important as Science Park in La Jolla and they each have strengths to offer one another.

With each evolutionary step of city growth, new generations of planning issues emerge. Early on in the revitalization of blighted areas, permission may be given to build anything, including mistakes, to keep an economic engine fueled. As an area begins its ascension and a new form begins to take place, quality of life issues begin to present themselves. Strategies to mitigate homeless populations and liquor stores arise alongside sidewalk caf   permit requests and demands for community-serving retail. The new economy, and the people driving that economy, move in and a battle ensues for the community that was and the new one that is emerging. But what we see emerging now is that rather than a battle of opposite interests, there is an integration of interests, and no sector of the population is viewed as right or wrong.

The next rung on the ascension ladder, which San Diego is moving into, is a step into connectivity and integration in large part due to increased population, diversity, expensive limited land, reviled long commutes and the desire for community amenities. This alchemy of evolutionary forces -- with an aggressive move by the city's redevelopment agency in acquiring and assembling land with tax increment funds being used to improve infrastructure and to finance affordable units -- has created an interesting amalgamation that turns out to be an outstanding economic development tool.

Great creativity arises by integrating cultures, races, income levels and age groups. This helps to fuel the economy, and as Richard Florida, MIT Economics Professor promotes, "creativity is the most important commodity in our economy, and thus the economic health of a place -- be it a city, region, or nation -- depends on its ability to attract creative people." In the new "creative economy," companies choose to relocate to the place with the best pool of talent. Talented people, in turn, are drawn to places that are dynamic and creative. Hence the future sustainability of our economies will be driven by creativity, connectivity and integration.

A report by Partners for Livable Communities linking quality of life and the economic success of cities concluded "cities that are not livable places are not likely to perform economic functions in the future. Enhancing livability therefore should be a central objective in every city's economic transition strategy and the elements of livability should be employed as economic development tools."

The renaissance of our downtown is the seed of our region's future. Components of the Downtown Community Plan Update focus much more on "soft" programming -- connectivity, open space, walk ability, art, affordable housing. Centre City Development Corp. and the Updated Downtown Community Plan are providing community and economic development models for a creative city of the future, but in order for effective implementation, these models must be applied to all parts of our region, including the City of Villages, San Diego General Plan and County General Plan.

In actuality, these models are really nothing all that new. They can be found in many plans in the past but the shortfall has come in the follow-through. We are now experiencing, more than ever, the lack of follow-through in these plans with the increase in potholes and the lack of sufficient fire stations and libraries. The pain has gotten so great that we have no choice but to force ourselves to follow through or, in other words, evolve. Evolving is excruciating, hence the reason we seek comfort and ease for as long as possible. Evolution forces us to understand our values and to make decisions that align with those values rather than let it slide to the next generation. Evolution equates to sacrifice and hard work.

In a city with cultural, social and economic integration, it is clear to see that if one part of the city is "rotting," the city cannot be sustainable. There is evidence that here in San Diego we are evolving into a creative city of the future. It is emerging and we invite you to look for it, because this is where the greatest sustainable economic opportunities for our region lie.

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