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The new green belief system

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"There are two ways to be fooled. One is to believe what isn't true; the other is to refuse to believe what is true." -
-Soren Kierkegaard, philosopher

At a recent community planning charrette setbacks for a multi-family home development adjacent to a waterway near the bay were being discussed when one of the members suggested the setbacks take into consideration rising sea levels due to global warming and the dialog ceased. All eyes were on the member who made the suggestion and one of the others said, "Oh, you are of that belief system?" A religion is a set of beliefs about our perceptions of reality. Our belief system assists our decision making process, how we live, what we buy, our relationships, where we live, how we create our cities, who we believe we are and how we think things work in this world. From the experience above we can see how the green revolution could be interpreted as a belief system. These beliefs are transforming the way we see life on this planet and with the passions that are invoked whether one believes or not the outcome may very well birth a new religion that provides a whole systems approach to how we live, work, play and worship that is sustainable, equitable and in balance with the environment and each other.

Not since the Renaissance has a time been more representative of that rebirth than now. Major institutions representing decades-long belief structures are going through a metamorphosis where some may transform, some may not and never before creations will be innovated. At the EcoCity World Summit last month in San Francisco, Stanford climatologist Stephen Schneider opened the conference by stating that science has now proved a preponderance of evidence that humans are adding to global warming and it is up to the community at large to determine the risk they will take to mitigate human impact or not. He stated that incentives need to be developed for industries, companies, cities, states and nations to lower emissions and that capital needs to enter into the equation that in addition to innovation, will make many rich. He stressed that strong leadership would be the first step towards effective implementation.

Brent Toderian, the new planning director for the city of Vancouver presented that their city's new planning process will move from a livable city model to an EcoDensity model where green and affordable enter into the livable equation. Another innovative government model was presented by Dan Beard, the chief administrative officer for the U.S. House of Representatives. Speaker of the House Pelosi ordered a plan to be put in place to make the House carbon neutral because she said the Capitol needs to be a beacon of environmental stewardship.

On the private side, Charlie Ricker from Bright Source Energy laid out their company's goal of developing and commercializing new solar thermal technology that can compete with fossil fuel plants. They recently signed 5 contracts with San Francisco-based PG&E to provide 900 MW (enough to power 500,000 households) of solar thermal power to Oakland, the largest solar power plant deal to date. Thankfully private industry is taking the lead on this because when Congress passed the energy bill last December, it did not extend any stimulus for wind and solar energy production, but oil and gas kept all their credits. This is counterintuitive for these times. Japan and Germany both have a solar incentive program that will last 12 years and 20 years, respectively. Hopefully, industry will continue to lead the way and inspire Congress to do the same which would allow the country to move our attention away from Iran and re-invest military spending toward issues that are more relevant such as alternative energy incentives, education and health care.

We have a local EcoCity trendsetter among us as well. Community HousingWorks, developer of Solara, the first apartment community in California to be fully powered by the sun is one of the winners of the prestigious national Urban Land Institute Award for Excellence which they will receive this morning at the ULI Spring Conference in Dallas. The jurors were impressed with the green features for sure, but were most impressed with the heart and soul that went into the details of this catalytic project. Community HousingWorks was also a recipient of a ULI San Diego/Tijuana Smart Growth Award in 2007.

ULI San Diego/Tijuana will host the fourth annual Smart Growth Awards program on June 26 at the Balboa Theatre, where we will recognize the innovators, implementers, visionaries, risk takers and believers who are the emerging leaders of the green renaissance.

Pauker is chair and Lydon is executive director of Urban Land Institute of San Diego/Tijuana.