



Thursday, January 05, 2006

editor@sddt.com

<http://www.sddt.com/>

Source Code: 20060105tza

Builders and environmentalists must make common cause

Wake up to the sustainability revolution

By Mary McLellan and Michael Stepner

Thursday, January 5, 2006

Sustain\ se-'stan\ 1: to give support or relief to 2: to supply with sustenance: nourish 3: to keep up: prolong

Degrade\ di'grad\ 1: reduced far below ordinary standards of civilized life and conduct 2: characterized by degeneration of structure or function

Optimum\ ap-te-mem\ 1: the most favorable condition for the growth and reproduction of an organism

So what is this sustainability movement that seems to be sweeping the country all about anyway? LEED certified buildings; renewable energy; alternative fuels; eco-municipalities; recycled materials; sustainable land use and planning; open space.

It seems we have been headed in the direction of degradation as of late, and it is time to bring our cities back to sustainability and then look to the future to optimize building better communities.

Across the United States the interest in, and desire for, a sustainable environment continues to grow. This interest has many names: Smart Growth, Livable Neighborhoods, Sustainable Design, New Urbanism and Landscape Urbanism. All have the identifier "green." Green Urbanism and Landscape Urbanism focus on urban ecology, open space and natural systems as the definer of urban form.

Author Richard Louv, in his book, *Last Child in the Woods*, wrote: "According to current ecological theory, preserving islands of wild land-parks and preserves in urban areas is not enough. Instead, a healthy urban environment requires natural corridors for movement and genetic diversity. What if such theory were applied to an entire urban region? What if natural corridors for wildlife extended deep into urban territory and urban psyche and thereby created an entirely different environment in which children would grow up and adults could grow old?"

At the autumn meeting of the Urban Land Institute in November of last year, from the keynote speakers to the breakout sessions, the topic of sustainability consistently arose. It was remarkable that when Paul Hawken, entrepreneur, author and international environmentalist, spoke to a room of 5,000 developers, architects, economists and other real estate disciplines about the importance of building our communities in a more sustainable way, the room was keenly attentive.

Last June, the ULI San Diego/Tijuana District Council invited Ed McMahon, a senior Fellow from ULI in Washington, D.C., to speak about Smart Growth. McMahon talked about the accelerating consumption and fragmentation of open land. "Twenty percent of new lots are 'large lots,' consuming about 80 percent of the land. In 1960 in the United States, there was six square feet of retail per person; by 2000, the number had increased to 30 square feet of retail per person." Not surprisingly, one reason for the change is the spread-out nature of development.

McMahon challenged the audience to ask three questions when discussing growth decisions: Where do you put it? How do you arrange it? What does it look like?

When we respond to those questions, our goals should be a healthy environment, vigorous economy and a vibrant community. Community image is critical to economic vitality and quality of life. Why would someone invest in a city that won't invest in itself?

There is an amalgamation between developers and environmentalists occurring at the edges. Together they are seeing the importance of listening to one another and the benefit that each brings to the table. The future, which is here now, holds a new definition for developers and environmentalists: perhaps eco-developers, where a development team has environmental expertise as part of its team, not to do the minimal amount required to get their project off the ground but to look for optimal ways to use the land. It will require a whole new way of problem-solving skills and vision, and our communities will evolve to places of well-being.

The most powerful catalyst for action occurs when the mission is driven by what matters most. Two years ago San Diego Civic Solutions, an all-volunteer civic organization focused on quality of life issues, posed the question to its 75 members, asking them to list the top 10 things they loved about San Diego -- not what the problems are or what we need to be more competitive or how to improve our economy, but what were the core values that they personally held for being in San Diego. Overwhelming, the top five items that emerged were related to our environment. They included: the beaches; the mountains; the canyons; the walkable neighborhoods; the climate and the light. From there emerged the mission of Civic Solutions: working on infrastructure issues, housing affordability and canyons -- our revered and unique open space.

This small sampling of engaged civic leaders may represent a larger sentiment in the hearts of San Diegans. This would be an excellent way for Mayor Sanders and his administration to engage the citizenry toward rebuilding public trust. Yes, we have tremendous fiscal challenges, but the people's hearts are not engaged. San Diego is about to have a new start and what we love may be just the focus that would reignite the passions of the people of San Diego.

There's a green revolution going on, and either the United States will wake up and lead the way or, as Thomas Friedman suggests in his latest book *The World is Flat*, China or India will. So join us in the dialogue over the course of the next few months as we present concepts, implementation strategies and call for action on emerging trends in sustainability.

McLellan is a community and economic development specialist focused on resource development, marketing and building strategic alliances for communities undergoing revitalization. She is also chairwoman of the Urban Land Institute San Diego/Tijuana District Council. She can be contacted at mary.mclellan@sddt.com. Comments may be published as Letters to the Editor.

Stepner is principal of the Stepner Design Group focused on urban policy planning, community planning and development and urban design. He is also a professor at the New School of Architecture and Design. He can be contacted at michael.stepner@sddt.com. Comments may be published as Letters to the Editor.