

**DEEOHN FERRIS, J.D., PRESIDENT
SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT GROUP**

A FEW THOUGHTS ON THE FUTURE OF OUR COMMUNITIES

LINKING ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND SMART GROWTH

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JUNE 22, 2012

The United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development's Brundtland Commission introduced the concept of sustainable development in a renowned 1987 report. The Commission's report defined sustainable development as

"development which meets the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

The concept supports strong economic and social development and meeting community needs now and in the future. Economic and social well-being is viewed as synonymous with protecting the natural resource base and the environment. Intergenerational solidarity is critical. Development must factor in the impact upon opportunities for future generations. These are fundamental tenets of environmental justice.

In his first year in office, President Obama made significant commitment to change which translates into new national direction in the United States. He committed the nation to a sustainable future that incorporates environmental quality for everyone and embarking on a new energy future; a green economy future with far-reaching societal and ecological benefits. Sustainability is the sine qua non.

The President's proclamation signifies that we as a nation are on the precipice, at the very beginning of determining what sustainability means; a term for which there is no single operational or omnibus definition. Largely it's more of a point of view – one that's spiritual, cultural, experiential or educational for example. As a matter of public policy and federal investments, (in no small part due to the perfect storm of climate change) **we the people** are in a national conversation about how going forward this nation will grow and develop sustainably. Without a doubt, if we don't get it right this time, we'll stay mired in the same decisions and mistakes that got us to:

- peak oil;
- climate change;
- environmental degradation;
- chronic unemployment that is staggering both the middle class and people who are challenged by low incomes;
- chronic minority health disparities;
- the credit crisis – which arguably began in communities of color; and
- accelerating poverty rates.

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Consistent with the Brundtland Commission, from the environmental justice standpoint, sustainable development is larger than eco-efficiency or resources conservation. Also, sustainability goes beyond the conventional market mechanics of community and economic development. Sustainability is the route to broad societal benefits and opportunities that address low wealth, unemployment, health disparities and community revitalization; among them, environmental cleanup, clean energy and energy-efficiency cost savings, affordable healthy homes and buildings, walkable and bike-able neighborhoods, safe jobs and new businesses.

Since the 1990s, principally in North America, smart growth surfaced as a variety of techniques to address sustainability by creating dense, compact neighborhoods. Smart growth promotes sustainability by challenging sprawl via infill development which preserves open and green spaces. Much – not all – but much of the smart growth conversation nationally, policies and place-based projects around the country reflect market-based thinking about sustainable growth and development. For better or for worse, in the minds of many people -- the moniker for smart growth is ‘mixed use transit oriented development’ – the smart growth antidote to sprawl. For many environmental justice stakeholders, infill is a four-letter word which means displacement resulting from insensitive, exclusively real estate market-driven development.

Community activists know that smart growth and market forces alone will not address the environmental, health, economic and social aggravations of sprawl. Markets on their own will not ameliorate the public and private sector disinvestments which financed sprawl or subsidized it. Nor will there ever be enough upscale, smart growth, subway-centered mixed-use developments to address the extent of low wealth communities in urban core, inner ring suburban and rural places around this nation.

Smart growth at the community level is about re-development and re-building our communities – not just the bricks and mortar – really, rebuilding the fabric of our communities in places where there is a lot of sustainable development catching up to do. Sprawl has disinvested inner ring suburbs and rural areas with consequences as dire as cities and towns that are under-capitalized or market-challenged or our older cities. Additionally, many small cities and towns and rural places are being left behind in the transition to the new, green economy similar to what’s happening in urban neighborhoods that don’t have the low-hanging fruit that many developers are looking for.

Race and low wealth are context in the smart growth equation in terms of involving historically distressed communities, identifying and meeting their needs, framing

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development projects, investments and outcomes and, ultimately, in terms of the long-term sustainability of development efforts. Environmental justice plus smart growth equals equity. Equity connects the dots between community revitalization, community interests and needs, planning and decisions that address inequities. Equity is the lens through which smart growth can contribute to addressing persistent problems that stymie prosperity – problems of:

- poverty, unemployment
- racism
- segregation
- redlining
- lack of affordable housing
- lack of access to transportation
- pollution and crime
- disease and ill-health
- bad schools and economic isolation.

Gentrification is the double edged sword of benefits and burdens that often accompanies smart growth redevelopment. It's routine to measure neighborhood improvement without asking whether the improvement comes at the expense or culture of people who already live and work, own and rent properties and own businesses there. Evidence of the area's history and culture fades. The working poor, people with lower incomes and fixed incomes like the elderly or disabled aren't able to afford to pay the rents and taxes or prices if they want to stay. Inclusionary zoning, first-hire ordinances and other useful devices simply aren't providing affordable housing or jobs ample enough for people who want to stay.

Low wealth communities and communities of color will continue to be hurt if they remain isolated from health, education and wealth-building opportunities. The new, green economy is our next best likelihood of transformation and the time is now. There's ample evidence that society-at-large – that's everybody – bears the cost of negative pressures and impacts in our neighborhoods. Financially and socially, everyone bears some of those costs as long as impacts and disparities go unaddressed. Nationally there is a lot at stake.

Sustainable, equitable development centers the community – involves the community – engages the community – in growth and development planning and decisions. There are benefits to taking advantage of the capacity of the entire community not just the decision makers and the powerful. Community leadership, engaging and involving people results in better, smarter development. As linchpins of the nation's emerging green economy, environmental justice, smart growth and equity can produce game-changing results.