

***Putting the Community Back in the Center:
Community-based Planning, and Development***

By Elizabeth Kline¹
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Pundits, authors, researchers, and ordinary people write and talk about “community”. In their minds, the American dream house is joined with a desire to know neighbors and feel connected to neighborhoods. Articles, chat rooms, news articles, public opinion polls, and television shows provide data, stories, examples, and conversations about people’s yearning for a “sense of community”.

What does a *healthy, sustainable, or livable community*² really mean? And how can planning³ and development⁴ help produce the essence of community that people espouse, but don’t necessarily know how to define?

Although people have their own values, beliefs, cultures, and tastes that will lead them to choose their own version of a desired community, they share common concerns. Intuitively, people know what they don’t want or like in themselves, family situations, homes, neighborhoods, cities or towns, regions, and their country. We don’t want to live in fear, to be afraid to walk to the bus station at night or worry that a child will be hit by a stray bullet or a sharp fist. We don’t want to be so poor that we are homeless, live in unheated apartments, have empty stomachs, or are unable to get needed health care. We are willing to commute long distances to jobs, but don’t want to lose out on spending time with family and friends. We don’t want to get sick or die because of polluted air or water, whether from contaminated drinking water sources or indoor air pollution. We don’t like people telling us what we should want or having people dictate how we should live.

This negative picture is a useful starting point. At least it is a strong image. Unfortunately, it isn’t so simple a conversion to translate each negative into a positive and have the composite result in a common definition of a healthy community. We can name some of the key bottom-line elements such as safe streets and schools; clean drinking water and clean air; affordable homes; jobs that pay enough to buy necessities; and transportation that is accessible and affordable. But these must-have ingredients don’t, in themselves, make us feel a part of a community or even define all the aspects that people desire. What about friendships, proximity to family members, life-long educational learning and credentials, meaningful work, careers fueled

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² These terms will be used interchangeably in this article, with the knowledge that each one has its own constituency, perspective, language, and frameworks. They share a common belief in replacing the current theories and practices with a systemic, holistic, integrative, multi-disciplinary approach that links economy, society, and environment.

³ “Planning” means the thinking about and designing of physical structures like houses, roads, schools as well as of landscapes such as waterfronts, ponds, recreational fields, cranberry bogs, and working farms.

⁴ “Development” means the actual physical production, siting, construction, and maintenance of these structures and landscapes. It does not usually refer to psychological or emotional development states.

by passion, having control over one's life, enjoying a diversity of activities with a variety of people? How important are these kinds of concerns in creating sustainable communities?

Over the past fifteen or so years, people from a variety of disciplines, fields of interest, backgrounds, and countries have been struggling to conceptualize and implement actions that seek to create more livable communities. Sometimes, the scale is at the level of a household or a small neighborhood. Other times, the experiments focus on whole regions such as watersheds, peninsulas, or mountain regions. Still others attempt to understand and foster changes statewide, nationally, and even globally. They all try to make human (i.e., urban centers, rural villages, suburban towns) and non-human places (i.e., wild lands, water bodies, mountains) healthier, more livable, more sustainable for individuals, families, groups of people, and also for non-humans (i.e., wildlife, marine life).

The move towards sustainability is both evolutionary and a significant change. Steps are taken incrementally, sometimes painfully slowly. Yet, its larger purpose is to create a radically different picture and reality of what is the American dream. Sustainability, as will be described later in detail, aims for equity, justice, fairness, and wellbeing for all. It is not founded on a belief that individual and societal wealth is created by the few and trickles down or accomplished through individual, boot-strap actions. The economic engine for sustainability is not ever-increasing growth, but a quality of development that respects and responds to natural limits and societal values.

TRENDS

I've noticed three clear trends in the evolution of the concept of "sustainability".

Trend 1: Re-Labeling

Many old approaches, techniques, strategies, and programs have accumulated the label "sustainability" without really changing any of their basic tenets. People who talk about "sustainable economic growth", for example, are still espousing the notion that society depends on more goods and services, more financial exchanges, more products, and more consumption. To them, sustainability simply means continuation of the economic foundation based on the neo-classical capitalistic economic model. Other people claim that a "sustainable environment" can occur only by preserving and restoring natural landscapes at the expense of people living and visiting these places. In both of these examples, key ingredients of sustainability are ignored in order to gain support for particular traditional agendas.

This trend is understandable, especially as the cache of "sustainability" brings rewards in terms of jobs, sales, audience, and image. Everyone looks for the new edge and "sustainability" is it for some people.

Trend 2: Disciplinary Change

The second trend is that disciplines are searching for relevance to sustainability within their own territory, language, culture, constituencies, and actions. Architects and landscape architects, for example, use their institutions (i.e. American Institute of Architects, American

Society of Landscape Architects, and Architects for Social Responsibility) to convene conferences, workshops, future searches, charrettes, and other avenues to educate, reward, and explore the concept of sustainable design. They advocate for green buildings, designs that complement neighborhood character, building code revisions that reward passive and active solar and alternative energies, making landscapes integral to building design, and New Urbanism that emphasizes density near transit stations, clustered development, and human-scale, mixed-use developments.

The U.S. Society for Ecological Economics provides economists with a journal and an annual meeting to explore environmentally and socially-based economic theories and practices. They conduct research, produce educational materials, and work on projects that incorporate social and environmental criteria in economic decisions. They accept non-financial economic transactions as relevant to the economy (i.e. bartered exchanges, local currency); espouse the limits of growth; and seek economic success based on long-term results (i.e. not the current focus on short-term payoffs).

The Healthy Communities movement was launched in the 1980's by public health advocates and is still dominated by health care providers, public health agency staff, public health-oriented researchers and practitioners. They focus on families, neighborhoods, and communities rather than only on individuals and promote "health" instead of curing the sick. "The Healthy Communities movement takes a broad view of health and employs a cross-section of human endeavors to achieve improved health status and community quality of life."⁵

Planners and policy makers are increasingly intrigued with the concept of "smart growth" which seeks, like the architects and landscape architects, to increase density in places that have transportation, water and sewer, road infrastructure; preserve and restore natural landscapes such as harbors, rivers, wetlands, prairies, and steep mountains; create socially alive and culturally rich day and evening places; preserve historic character; and promote mixed use developments rather than separate residential from commercial uses.

In the corporate business world, there are the supporters and implementers of "ecology of commerce" (the title of Paul Hawken's 1993 best-seller) and The Natural Step principles⁶ and techniques first articulated by a Swedish doctor named Dr. Karl-Henrik Robert. The green building industry, production changes to remove toxic materials, eco-industrial parks, and product take-back provisions are examples of the fruits of this dramatic change in how to do business the environmentally and socially responsible way.

The Sustainable Community movement tends to attract community practitioners, community-based researchers, and individuals who want to improve their own lives and lifestyles as well as the places where they live and work. Some of these people want to live life more simply and in closer touch with nature. The explosion in organic farming, vegetarianism, self-down-sizing from the rat-race to more personally satisfactory work, informal volunteerism

⁵ Norris, Tyler and Mary Pittman. The Healthy Communities Movement and the Coalition for Healthier Cities and Communities in Public Health Reports. Vol. 115. Numbers 2 & 3. March/April & May/June 2000; p. 119.

⁶ The Natural Step approach applies ecological principles to business practices. It is now a worldwide movement. More information can be found in the website (www.naturalstep.org).

around community-building activities, and a search for spirituality are testimonials of the Sustainable Community movement.

All of these discipline-based initiatives are striving to open up and change the mindsets of their colleagues and clients, and ultimately change the way their professions are defined and practiced. To a great degree, change is being promoted from *within* rather than *across* disciplines and fields. This circumstance is understandable and strategically appropriate given the difficulties in changing people's attitudes and beliefs. Better to approach peers and colleagues rather than try to convince someone in a different discipline, field, type of organization, or group that they need to change.

Trend 3: Community-Based Partnerships

The third trend is a shift in roles from the outside experts providing advice, direction, and answers towards a pledged partnership with people and organizations representing communities. The notion of "partnership" and "collaboration" encourage people in communities to speak their mind; insist on having their ideas heard and respected; and view themselves as legitimate partners in collaborations with outsider investors and interested parties.

Giving up and sharing power is a very difficult challenge for people who traditionally had, and still have, control over financial and human resources, political power, societal stature, and have long assumed roles and expectations of being responsible for others. Many organizations, especially nonprofits, compete for limited funds and are, therefore, understandably reluctant to share resources, let go of their traditional roles and responsibilities, and lose some of their leverage as representatives/negotiators/advocates for others.

Many times, so-called partnerships and/or collaborations are for show only. Certainly there are still many consultants, professional staff, corporate leaders, academics, and government agency officials who dictate where and how to distribute funds; provide specialized expert advice to solve other people's perceived problems; view "partnership" as sharing data collected from sites in communities that they choose for the benefits of their own studies and investigations; and design and build structures and developments based on their market analyses rather than on community-defined needs.

The first step is to open up the decision-making process to include voices of the community.⁷ When angry community people move from the streets and parks into the halls of government, they are asking to be heard. When foundations, government agencies, and corporate leaders delegate allocation of funds for after-school or substance abuse programs and allow citizens to influence the height, scale, and design of buildings in the neighborhood, then they are taking steps towards power-sharing.

⁷ Determining who represents or speaks for the community is itself a very difficult challenge. In this case, the point is to acknowledge that the many voices in a community deserve to be heard and respected. This viewpoint counteracts the perspective that outside experts are best positioned to make decisions on behalf of people in communities.

As will be clear later on in this article, authentic partnership and collaboration for community-based planning and development requires that communities⁸ be placed at the center. This viewpoint presumes that the needs of the community are the focal point for discussion and resolution. It doesn't assume that everyone in the community is right or that the community's needs have to be automatically honored and addressed. It does, however, shift the orientation from a partnership of equals to one that places everyone's attention on understanding and meeting the needs of the community. This leap is beyond most people's current conception and, certainly, practice.

KEY STEPS TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

Accelerating the move towards sustainable communities will take, I believe, four key steps. They are not, necessarily, chronological; they can be implemented in any order.

Step 1: Put the Community Back in the Center

What does the provocative title of this article mean?

Years ago when many people lived with or near their families, their lives were rooted in geographical places. They knew and relied on their neighbors for protection, comfort, support, and friendship. In New England, the image and reality of this centeredness was the town common or village green. In rural villages and enclaves today, there is still that sense of small town community where people help each other in times of need because they know each other well, have a tradition of mutual support, and/or identify with people who live in their community⁹.

Over the years, people and their connection to places have changed. People move more frequently, family cohesion has eroded, and communities themselves often look, feel, and are very different from the way people remember them from their childhood days. Add to this situation, an increasing emphasis on specialization, quick fixes, short-term attention spans, and reliance on experts. Increasingly, people have become dependent on others to speak and advocate for their interests and concerns. They let others define the measures of their progress and success or failure; create societal expectations; and determine the rules-of-the-game under which all people in a civil society are supposed to function.

The result is a strong tendency for decisions to be made by professional experts, people with financial resources, government bureaucrats, non-profit organizational staff, landowners, and a limited number of powerful local, state, and regional political leaders. Each group operates within its own culture, values, bottom-line needs, and rules. All, presumably, believe that they are improving the lives of people living, working, and visiting communities.

⁸ "Communities" is plural because people belong to many communities simultaneously. For example, someone can belong to the female gender, come from Chinese heritage, live in Chinatown, within the Greater Boston watershed, which is part of New England, the Northeast, and the United States of America. Depending of that person's self-identity, she can belong to many of these communities.

⁹ Daniel Kemmis, author and former mayor of Missoula, Montana writes eloquently about this situation. See *Community and Politics of Place*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990.

Given the multiple players, the large number of decision-makers, the sanctity of private property, the lack of clear and consistent policy frameworks, and the often confusing, inconsistent, and changing rules of the game, it is not surprising that planning, development, health, transportation, environmental, education decisions are made by those with power and resources based on their own perspectives. They represent their constituents. Who even notices whose voice is missing?

The switch from a multi-centered decision-making group with a bulls-eye targeted on the community to one where the community is the front-and-center starting point requires a mindset change. It isn't good enough to claim that you have the best interests of the community in mind when acting on its behalf or making decisions that affect it. Nor is it adequate to conduct creative advertising to promote your plan, project, or product and let the marketplace determine if people support your offerings.

New England town meetings, where residents in a community vote on major public decisions like building schools or libraries, zoning parcels of land for specific broad purposes (i.e., single family residential, apartments, small-scale commercial, industrial), and budget allocations, try to put the community at the center. In reality, though, specialization and dependence on outside experts prevail.

The planning board, for example, wants to revitalize a town center and hires a professional economic planner to recommend proposed zoning changes. In this example, the planning board – a distinct body – decides that there is a problem needing to be fixed. Maybe, the local business people and the constituent users (including out-of-towners) are invited to public meetings for consultation, but they aren't in the drivers' seat helping the planning board understand what improvements they need to provide and what goods and services they want. The power resides with the professional, guided by the local governmental body responsible for that aspect of a development decision; in this instance, zoning revisions.

Both the planner and the planning board represent and act on behalf of the community's interests. Town surveys, public forums, visioning sessions, future searches, and town meeting votes seek community input, support, and legitimacy. In the best of circumstances, people understand and approve of the recommendations offered by the planning board. The planning board (one of the many representative bodies) is in the center and not the community.

In another example, health care and housing providers and other service delivery organizations organize, advocate, and distribute resources for their clients. This tier of groups is a powerful force between the government agencies, private sector entities, and the community people (i.e, citizens). They need to worry about budget and personnel needs and limitations, credibility, stature, continuity in order to perpetuate their own viability. Sometimes, these concerns affect the ability of citizens to advocate for and receive support for their perceived or unmet needs.

The distinction between expert-centered community representation and community-based representation is not related to the value of representation in a democracy since we depend on

some people and some groups to speak on behalf of others. Rather, the importance is in whom has the responsibility and power to define and express community perspectives, orientations, concerns, and needs.

Perhaps, an analogy from an emerging field will help explain what it means to put the community in the center. “Co-active professional and personal coaching” believes that the client must be at the center if the needs of that person are truly to be met. “The agenda comes from the client. The client is in charge.”¹⁰ The relationship is focused on the coach serving as a resource to help the client get more of the results that the client wants to achieve. Power is granted to the relationship (and, therefore, both parties) and not held only by the coach. Clients determine how they want to be coached; on what issues; and with kinds of expectations. The relationship is custom tailored to the client

Here, the community is the client. The collective community needs to define its needs and establish relationships with representatives (such as the planning board, the hospital, the housing authority) and professionals (such as the economic planner, health care provider, transportation engineer) to help it figure out what best responds to its defined needs. Power is not based on hierarchy, knowledge, resources, stature, dominance, or any of the typical indicators in our current society. It is shared and depends on developing and following mutually evolved agreements. Moreover, it works only if the coaches’ role is to help people discover how to meet their collective community needs rather than to negotiate on their behalf, make their own recommendations, or steer people towards their preferred solutions.

In the co-active coaching model, there are five “contexts”: Listening, Self-management, Intuition, Curiosity, and Forward the Action/Deepen the Learning. The key point here is not what these terms mean, but to appreciate the perspective that each one is “a light that comes from the coach and shines on the client. Each one illuminates the coaching relationship in a different way.”¹¹ Each context has its own skills set to train people to become more effective coaches. The revolutionary notion, at the heart of this approach, is that the client is and remains at the center.

Co-active coaches focus on the client’s words, concerns, and ideas. They are supposed to help their clients by asking probing questions and providing challenges for people to think about and act upon. Coaches are still leaders; just very different from the conventional take-charge kind. This naïve sounding approach is remarkably revolutionary. It places clients in the position of being ultimately responsible for themselves. It presumes that, with effective coaching, clients can and will understand themselves and sort out what they need and how to get there. This approach is used primarily with single or small group clients. It is unclear whether or not coaching can be effective as a way to enable diverse community voices to be heard and organized.

In a similar vein, putting the community in the center is predicated on the belief that people in the community need to take responsibility for their individual and collective lives. They need to decide what their neighborhood should look like; what new uses are desired; how to balance competing interests; and how to ensure equity among the many current and future

¹⁰ *Co-Active Coaching Manual*. Co-Active Space. 2000, p. 6.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 8.

community members. They cannot simply turn planning and development decisions over to professional experts, landowners, or the politically powerful.

Taking on this level of responsibility is a challenge since we are accustomed to, at best, understanding multiple community voices and needs through surveys, public meetings, or representative decision-making. These techniques are useful, but insufficient. The goal is not outreach, but engagement. Tools such as visioning sessions, future searches, charrettes, and role-playing exercises help draw out people into conversations, debates, and dialogs but are still not sufficient to capture the full range of community values, concerns, and ideas. These forums are limited by who participates; and we all know that only a small portion of any community shows up and even fewer speak out.

New techniques need to be explored to reach into the community deep enough using language that each person understands, in settings that are familiar and comfortable, and in a variety of ways that appeal to people who think and respond differently (i.e., in writing, drawing, music, dance, etc.).

Step 2: Realize that the community is not broken and does not need to be fixed. The community seeks improvement.

John McKnight and John Kretzmann, co-directors of The Asset-Based Community Development Institute in Evanston, Illinois have popularized the concept of building on a community's assets rather than on its problems or debts.¹² This shift in thinking is gradually gaining favor in academia, foundations, government, and community-based programs. At its core, an asset-based approach steers people's thinking towards possibilities, opportunities, and resources from within a community that can be harnessed for its benefit. For example, instead of focusing on the negative implications of a depressed downtown economy as measured by the many vacant buildings, an asset-based approach identifies the same places as opportunities for re-investment and seeks to determine what kinds of uses are both desired by people in the community and by potential owners and renters.

Many of the sustainable community indicator projects aim to measure the assets or positive aspects of their community in addition to evaluating traditional negative-type indicators. For example, the recent Boston, Massachusetts report¹³ includes "civic confidence", "stability and investment within neighborhoods", "investment in healthy children", "healthy behaviors", "attractive green and recreational spaces", and "clean usable land" in addition to negative indicators such as loss of open space land, morbidity rates, and economic disparities by race, class, and neighborhood.

¹² Their handbooks are excellent. For example, refer to: *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* (1993) and follow-up reports such as *A Guide to Mapping Consumer Expenditures and Mobilizing Consumer Expenditure Capacities* (1996).

¹³ *The Wisdom of Our Choices: Boston's Indicators of Progress, Change and Sustainability*. Published and distributed by The Boston Foundation (2000). The Indicators Project is in the process of conceptualizing a second report.

The basic idea is to help people appreciate and build on the positives in their own lives, their neighborhoods, and communities. If mindsets can focus on what is working and what is possible, then people find it easier to confront their problems and support constructive improvements. If they dwell on the negatives, then the tendency is to get stuck on blame (i.e., who is at fault), defensive justifications, anger, and frustrations of life.

In the Healthy Communities movement, “public health” is defined as going “beyond the traditional medical emphasis on prevention, detection and cure...It also suggests that public assets, such as education, work, housing, and transportation, enhance community life and well-being. Studies confirm that secure income, higher educational levels, quality housing, and social cohesion – areas in which medicine has traditionally had little input – translate into improved health.”¹⁴

Although this shift of focusing on assets is critical in improving people’s lives, the next one is even more fundamentally important. This step asks people to think of their communities not as broken and not needing to be fixed. This attitude is contrary to most people’s perceptions, especially when they know that they live in places that are dirty, unsafe, full of unemployed people, and have many vacant storefronts. Why is this condition not a broken community?

It is and it isn’t. Certainly, the data tells a negative story. Yet, if people can look at themselves and their community as a whole, and emphasize their capacity to improve, then their attitude becomes what can we do to move in the right direction and make our lives better and our communities more sustainable.

Again, the analogy to co-active coaching is relevant. The co-active coaching model believes that the “client is naturally creative, resourceful, and whole. Nothing is broken or needs fixing. The coach has the questions, clients have the answers.”¹⁵ This attitude is different from therapy in that the client isn’t asked to understand problems or inadequacies, but to identify needs for self-improvement and explore, with the coach’s guidance, ways towards greater balance and fulfillment.

It may sound far-fetched, but try this approach and be amazed at its success. If people – be they teachers, employers, or friends – believe that their students, workers, and companions are “whole” individuals and have the capacity to improve their lives and their communities then the support, guidance, direction, and instruction offered is fundamentally different than if they believe that they have disabilities or inadequacies.

No one denies problems, liabilities, difficulties, and frustrations with situations that are very negative. However, the attitude that is brought to dealing with these situations is one that believes in the capacity of self-improvement and in the strategy of striving to heal, get better, and realize personal and community potential.

In planning and development terms, this attitude translates into opportunities that

¹⁴ Kurland, Judith. Making Healthy Communities in Public Health Reports. Vol. 115. March/April & May/June 2000; p. 197.

¹⁵ *Co-active Coaching Manual*, p. 6.

- create balance (i.e., restore degraded water and land; add housing variety to appeal to the range of community needs);
- respect physical context (i.e., design with a sensitivity to adjacent and nearby structures' age, materials, and character);
- fill in gaps (i.e., reuse of once contaminated lands; in-fill housing);
- respond to people's priorities rather than expert-driven concerns; and
- include people normally ignored in these kinds of decisions (i.e., teenagers, homeless, people of color).

Step 3. Respond to the Community as a System.

System thinkers have characterized communities as dynamic systems with flows coming from outside (e.g., transportation, imported energy, food), flows within (e.g., dollars, immigrants, goods and services, bartered exchanges), and flows passing on to other places (e.g., water and sewer infrastructure, emigrants, excess energy, commuters).

Common sense provides examples from daily life about how often we interact with things that are outside as well as within our communities. Birds travel across boundaries on spring migrations as well as feed in our parks and backyards. Our breakfast food comes by truck and air as well as from our own gardens and farmers' markets. We commute to work in cars, trucks, buses, trains, or on bicycles as well as work from a home office or walk to work. In our leisure time, we travel long distances to see new cultures, climb mountains, and sit on sandy beaches; we also, spend time watching local ball games and going to local movie theatres.

The key point is to view communities as systems when doing planning and development activities. This perspective translates into:

- understanding and working with linkages rather than seeking solutions to address one-dimensional problems. For example, economic development in a dynamic community setting is more than attracting jobs. It is directly tied to education, skills training, housing, transportation, cost of living, image, labor pool, cultural and historical heritage, and health care. Workers are not bodies to be counted, but are people who have needs. Worker productivity is dependent on healthy workers who are not prevented from working because of sickness, lack of affordable transportation, psychological family pressures, or a host of other pertinent needs and concerns.
- realizing that decisions made in one place have implications and consequences elsewhere. For example, if a multiplex movie theatre is encouraged to move into a neighborhood it may mean more fun times, more jobs for local teenagers, and more business for nearby storeowners. It also may mean more cars parked on local streets, more traffic congestion, and more outsiders into a small neighborhood setting. There is no right or wrong decision. What matters is understanding the full implications of any development decision -- both short and long-term impacts.

Some activity may be valued immediately, but its presence creates undesirable changes several months or years later. For example, people may support a large discount store nearby because of its choice of products, its friendly service, its jobs, its tax revenues, and its relatively cheap purchase prices. Yet, some time later people may discover that their favorite hardware store has closed because it cannot compete. This consequence may or may not be inevitable or desirable but it is *predictable*.

- the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. A community has a collective identity that is more than an aggregate of neighborhoods, cultures, traditions, building types, and landscapes. A system is complex and, simultaneously, simple. A community has an image and people's sense of belonging is attached to this identity.

Planning, design, and development schemes need to understand and respect this collective identity or else it may gradually erode. Change can reinforce or undermine community character, identity, tradition, and loyalty. This dictum is not intended to resist change or modernization. Rather, change happens whether or not people want or are ready for it. The challenge is how to understand what is and make reasoned decisions with that knowledge in mind.

Step 4: Define Sustainable Community as moving towards economic security, ecological integrity, quality of life, and empowerment with responsibility.

The final step is to understand and apply the intellectual framework for nurturing more sustainable communities. Planners, architects, developers, contractors, and users need to make decisions based on what they want to produce. Is the result to be luxury homes on large lots or mixed-use human-scale developments located near transit stops or both? Do people feel safer if sidewalks and bicycle paths are separated from vehicular traffic? Are people more likely to get annual physicals if health care centers are located in their neighborhoods...in their buildings...or if health care providers come to their homes? Should employment opportunities be encouraged in residential neighborhoods?

Over the past decade or so, academics, practitioners, and professionals have been exploring and explaining the key ingredients of a sustainable, livable, healthy community. Usually, the definition has three categories. One deals with environment, another with economy, and the third with quality of life (sometimes called "society" or "community").¹⁶ I add a fourth dimension that deals with power and who makes decisions.

My basic definition for a more sustainable community is one that *strives to become more environmentally sound, economically viable, and socially just*.¹⁷ There are more key characteristics that embody more sustainable communities: economic security, ecological

¹⁶ Maureen Hart's website (www.sustainablemeasures.com) is an excellent resource for providing background materials on the various definitions and indicators of sustainable communities.

¹⁷ These words were used in October, 1999 in a paper written for a talk delivered in Seoul, Korea at an international eco-city conference.

integrity, quality of life, and empowerment with responsibility.¹⁸ Each will be defined and briefly explained in terms that relate to planning and development.¹⁹ Some indicators will be suggested in order to help flesh out the distinction between traditional and sustainable planning and development.

Ecological Integrity

Traditionally, environmental policies, programs, laws, and decisions focus on reducing risks that harm natural resources (i.e., environmental protection). Consider, for example, the number of initiatives dealing with waste disposal -- hazardous waste clean-up, solid, wastewater, medical waste, low level and high level radioactive waste disposal. A sustainable planning and development perspective shifts the emphasis from risks to the health of the natural ecosystems (i.e., ecological integrity). The starting point is the environmental health of natural systems rather than on the impacts to those wetlands, rivers, and airsheds.

Moreover, environmental impacts are not limited to a project site or to a confined pond or discharge point. Rather, the entire ecological system is of concern and the challenge is to understand how a particular development not only impacts natural resources on site, but also how those inter-connected land, water, and air resources are also affected.

The basic goal of sustainable development in the realm of the environment is to use development to restore, preserve, conserve, and enhance the ability of natural systems to function for the benefit and enjoyment of humans, animals, wildlife, marine life, and other living creatures now and in the future. Development can be seen as an opportunity for community improvement rather than dealt with as a source of environmental problems. How can this lofty goal be pursued?

A more environmentally sustainable community enhances, rather than undermines, ecological integrity is in harmony with natural systems by reducing and converting waste into non-harmful and beneficial purposes and by utilizing the natural ability of environmental resources for human needs without undermining their ability to function over time.

Embedded within this explanation are two key decision-making pathways. The first one aims to produce without polluting and without waste. This approach does not imply that all by-products are eliminated or that emissions are zero. Rather, it reflects the belief that, like natural processes, humans can design and use materials in ways where harmful ingredients are eliminated and non-harmful 'wastes' become the building materials for another purpose.²⁰ Eco-industrial parks are an example of how urban areas

¹⁸ These terms are defined and explained through case study examples in my 1993 report, *Defining a Sustainable Community*, available through Tufts University's Global Development and Environment Institute (www.ase.tufts.edu/gdae).

¹⁹ Much of this description comes from the author's *Viewpoint: Planning and Creating Eco-cities; indicators as a tool for shaping development and measuring progress* published in *Local Environment*, Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 344-348.

²⁰ For more information about The Natural Step approach, refer to the group's website (www.naturalstep.org).

can take advantage of the vast volumes of what is now undesired waste (such as, construction debris, steam, and residuals) and the close proximity of people. By identifying these waste streams and human resources, revising processes, and finding and creating markets for these wastes or converting them into useable products, people can not only reduce the adverse impacts on the environment and on human health, but they can also generate jobs and income.

The second pathway seeks to use natural resources within their natural limits or constraints. Environmentally sound utilization of natural resources implies a fundamental change in the way we do business. It means more than pollution prevention, reduction, and reuse. It implies a thorough enough understanding of how ecosystems function, an ability to set thresholds for their long-term health, and a philosophy of development which seeks to utilize natural resources in ways which keep pace with their productivity.²¹

From a sustainable development perspective, this means taking advantage of natural light and air; using solar and wind power; siting structures away from the flood-prone areas; planting trees to reduce heating and cooling costs and to provide scenic amenities, particularly in dense neighborhoods; constructing with wood based on sustainable forestry practices; using water and energy efficient fixtures and recycled products; and a host of other design, construction, and use methods. It also means having a scientific understanding of how different ecosystems operate so that, for example, wetlands and riverbanks can be effectively used as natural pollution filters and as natural buffers against flood damage.

Economic Security

For many communities, economic development is the highest priority concern. Even people who have jobs worry about future employment or having the skills, knowledge, and ability to advance in their careers or find replacements when their jobs end. The tendency in defining economic development is to focus on jobs and to measure progress by the number of new jobs produced or to focus on revenues or productivity, measured by the number of tax dollars collected or the gross national or domestic product.

However, economic development has a broader scope, measuring individual and community wealth (i.e., income trends, poverty, personal consumption), economic opportunities (i.e., jobs, tourism, environmental businesses), and economic performance (i.e., productivity, cost-effective government infrastructure). From a sustainable community perspective, the term ‘economic security’ may be more appropriate than ‘economic development’ or ‘growth’ because it addresses essential links including education, training, environmental soundness, and occupational safety.

²¹ Good sources of information about sustainable business are www.sustainablebusiness.com and the Rocky Mountain Institute at www.rmi.org.

A more economically sustainable community has a variety of businesses, industries, and institutions which are environmentally sound (in all aspects); financially viable; provide training, education, and other forms of assistance to adjust to future needs; provides jobs and spend money within a community; and enables employees to have a voice in decisions that affect them. It also is one in which residents' money remains in the community.

This characteristic, like the other three, are inter-related with each other. For example, financial viability depends, in part, on reduced costs that can be derived from environmental efficiencies and reliance on a local and productive labor pool. Therefore, indicators can be sought that measure several aspects simultaneously. For example, the number of environmental businesses measures both economic development and environmental soundness.

Another helpful hint in devising urban sustainable development indicators to gauge economic security is to look at *what* to measure in order to know whether or not a community is moving towards economic security. It is important to know that a community is encouraging and producing a diverse economic base, as measured by the variety and number of new locally owned businesses. However, it is even more useful to consider disparities, which measure ranges. For example, the number of employees who work for the largest one to three employers might alert a community to its dependence on a few businesses or industries. This analysis was helpful to the City of Cambridge, Massachusetts when economic development officials realized that their economic base was dependent on local government and universities (whose employment was stable and not increasing) and on several industries (whose job base was declining). New policies and incentives were adopted to encourage development of small-scale businesses as the likely growth sector.

Another economic security aspect, besides looking for economic soundness of the economic producers and for disparities, is local wealth. Local wealth comprises both monetary and non-monetary exchanges. It measures the contributions of residents and businesspersons in their community. All communities, including poor urban neighborhoods, have dollars and human capital to cycle within the community. For example, how many buy from each other or get their food, stationary, equipment, supplies from outside the community? Are there official exchanges, local currencies (i.e., "time dollars"), and community-assisted agriculture projects? Are there micro-business lending programs and loans available to encourage start-ups and expansions of local businesses?

A fourth aspect or pathway relating to economic security is mutual assistance, the degree to which people who work together cooperate and share resources that benefit them and the community as a whole. This kind of economic interdependence leads to benefits from economies of scale, job references, psychological support, mentoring, and skill development.

Quality of Life

Communities are comprised of more than buildings, infrastructure, natural resources, and employment centers. People live in neighborhoods, villages, towns, cities and regions. Sustainable development strives to improve people's quality of life by addressing people's yearnings for decent, safe, enjoyable, and spiritually rewarding and caring places to live, work, and visit.

Measuring quality of life is more than accounting for material needs, such as shelter and medical care. It extends into qualitative values such as having a sense of belonging to a community, feeling safe enough to play outdoors, choosing the appropriate housing according to one's lifestyle needs and desires, having a close connection to nature even in the most populated neighborhoods and largest cities, and enjoying the bonds and traditions of spirituality and generosity.

Some other sustainability frameworks label this characteristic as 'society' or 'community'. The title does not matter; what is important is to plan and develop in ways that people feel comfortable, satisfied, and special in their community.

A high quality of life community promotes a good quality of life for everyone is one that recognizes and supports people's evolving sense of well-being that includes a sense of belonging, a sense of place, a sense of self-worth, a sense of safety, sense of spirituality, sense of caring, and a sense of connection with nature, and provides goods and services which meet people's needs both as they define them and as can be accommodated within the ecological integrity of natural systems.

Since these kinds of concerns reflect people's beliefs, opinions, and perceptions, indicators need to be developed that can be measured through surveys, opinion polls, discussion groups, interviews, and other qualitative methods.

Clearly, one of the greatest concerns of people all over the world is access to and delivery of basic services. Quality of life, at a minimum, needs to provide people with adequate housing, health care, childcare, education, and public safety. The standards will vary from place-to-place and country-to-country, but all people deserve basic coverage.

'Basic' in a sustainable development context means more than survival. It means, for example, offering people different housing types to meet their lifestyle needs whether this means apartments for individuals and small families, co-housing for people who wish to live more as an intentional community, artist studios, housing for people over 55 years, or assisted living for people who have special health care needs. In the realm of health, it means much more than is traditionally included in the ranking of people's "quality of life" ranging from low (i.e., serious sick) to high (i.e., not sick, well). It includes "cultural norms that support behavior and lifestyle choices; education, learning, and skill building; safe and adequate housing; recreation and culture; public safety; youth mentors; volunteers; the workplace; jobs that pay a living wage; family; nonprofit organizations;

health promotion and preventive services; the faith community; media; government; and transportation.”²²

In terms of public safety, ‘basic’ quality of life means more than stopping violent crimes. People want to feel safe allowing their children to play in a nearby park or waiting for a bus at an urban street corner at night. Indicators that measure funds invested in public services provide some measure of commitment, but do not reveal the effectiveness of service delivering those services. Other indicators need to be used to evaluate whether or not, for example, children are being inoculated against diseases and not simply that funds have been allotted or spent for such a purpose.

Two other aspects of quality of life are encouraging self-respect and caring. These pathways are connected to individual and community capacity since people who have confidence, respect for each other, and reach out and support others are more willing to take initiatives and produce constructive results. When people feel depressed, anxious, and unhappy, they tend to be critical, resistant to change, more selfish, and less able to think about the well-being of their neighbors.

An ethos of caring and generosity allows people to look beyond themselves – their own personal lives and property – and realize the value (even to themselves) of public good, sacrifice, sharing, and building something together for the sake of future generations, people in other places, people who are different from them, and for the Earth as a whole.

A pulse of a community can be gauged by reading media descriptions, listening to local commentaries, hearing public testimonies, and analyzing which issues political leaders focus on and how they respond.

Indicators aimed at measuring self-respect and caring are often labeled ‘civic or social capacity’ or ‘civic society’ indicators because they seek to know how well people know their neighbors; how often they volunteer, mentor, or otherwise assist someone in need; how often they attend multi-cultural events; and how involved they are in community groups and civic associations.

Another related ingredient is connectedness. People’s quality of life depends on how much they feel that they belong to a group, a neighborhood, a city, a region, a country. The closer the identity, the more likely people are to invest in maintaining and improving their communities. So, indicators such as the length of time people have lived in their neighborhood; their familiarity with their neighbors; knowledge of the watershed in which they live; the number of social/cultural/sports organizations they participate in are valuable measures of connectedness. Ask people in New York City where they live and they will respond with ‘the Upper West Side’, ‘the Village’, ‘Brooklyn Heights’, ‘near Central Park’, or some other neighborhood identity. They also can tell you the

²² Norris, Tyler and Mary Pittman. *The Healthy Communities Movement and the Coalition for Healthier Cities and Communities in Public Health Reports*. Vol. 115. Numbers 2 & 3. March/April & May/June 2000; p. 119.

places where they shop for fish or specialty foods, especially if they have lived in the area for some time.

Empowerment with Responsibility

The final, and equally important, characteristic of a more sustainable community deals with people's capacity and assertiveness to take control over their lives. Empowerment is the opportunity and capacity for meaningful and effective participation. Without empowerment, people and communities are more buffeted and manipulated by outside forces.

Empowerment, however, is not sufficient. People's skills, abilities, knowledge, and visions need to be harnessed and converted into actions. They want more say in decisions that affect them, such as how government spends tax dollars, where and what kind of jobs businesses create, what is the nature of health care provided by professionals, and the choice and role of experts who are hired to provide technical assistance in confronting complex community problems.

A community where people feel and are empowered, and take charge of their lives is based on a shared vision, equal opportunity, ability to access expertise and knowledge for their own needs, and a capacity to affect the outcome of decisions which affect them.

Four ingredients can be considered to define and measure a community's ability to influence decisions: capacity, equity/fair playing field, 'reaching in', and accountability.

In the final assessment of the Northern New England Sustainable Communities Project, the major finding was the "importance of community capacity building as the foundation for achieving constructive results. Quantifiable results are most notable in communities which are the most sophisticated in capacity building -- those with seasoned leaders, opportunities for training and educating emerging leaders, effective institutional structures, and widespread public involvement and support".²³

Equity does not mean that everything is equal; rather, it implies equal opportunity and equal access. Equity affects people's sense of empowerment and the degree to which they take responsibility for themselves and for others. Equity indicators measure gaps, but do not presume values. As with many sustainable development indicators, responses may invite more questions and probes to understand why something is happening in a community and what those results mean. For example, the number derived from measuring the percentage of public school teachers of color as compared with percentage of registered school age children of color provides some feedback, but does not interpret whether or not this figure is reasonable, explainable, or acceptable.

²³ *Northern New England Sustainable Communities Implementation Project: Lessons Learned*. November, 1997, p. 2. This report is available from the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation in Concord, NH (www.nhcf.org).

“Reaching in”²⁴ is a term I described in Defining Sustainable Community Indicators to characterize the process of people in communities who broaden their base of participation and open up discussions to attract and listen to diverse constituent perspectives. The common term, ‘reaching out’ implies that someone or some group seeks allies to their position by inviting supporters to join them. ‘Reaching in’, on the other hand, includes strategies such as physically going to where people feel most comfortable (i.e., their home base); asking them to describe their concerns and interests; and building relationships and ideas without having a predetermined solution in mind. Indicators to measure this concept include the number of new participants added to a process over a specified time period and the source of new project ideas and recommendations.

The last ingredient, accountability, reflects the belief that promoting sustainable development is everyone’s responsibility. No sector including government, no group (elected or appointed), and no individual has the burden or capacity of representing everyone’s interests. Each person has a special contribution and a responsibility to participate. Indicators can measure the extent to which people and institutions are actively working to make their communities better places and to what extent they are meeting their obligations and are held accountable for their actions.

In summary, the following chart lists the four key characteristics of a more sustainable community.

Ecological Integrity

A more sustainable community is in harmony with natural systems by reducing and converting waste into non-harmful and beneficial purposes and by utilizing the natural ability of environmental resources for human needs without undermining their ability to function over time.

Economic Security

A more sustainable community includes a variety of businesses, industries, and institutions which are environmentally sound (in all aspects), financially viable, provide training, education, and other forms of assistance to adjust to future needs, provide jobs and spend money within a community, and enable employees to have a voice in decisions which affect them. A more sustainable community also is one in which residents' money remains in the community.

Quality of Life

A more sustainable community recognizes and supports peoples' evolving sense of well-being which includes a sense of belonging, a sense of place, sense of self-worth, sense of safety, a sense of connection with nature, and provision of goods and services which meet their needs both as they define them and as can be accommodated within the ecological integrity of natural systems.

²⁴ *Defining Sustainable Community Indicators*. 1995, p. 19. This report is available from The Global Development and Environment Institute at Tufts University (www.tufts.edu/gdae).

Empowerment and Responsibility

A more sustainable community enables people to feel empowered and take responsibility based on a shared vision, equal opportunity, ability to access expertise and knowledge for their own needs, and a capacity to affect positively the outcome of decisions which affect them.

STRATEGIES FOR CREATING MORE SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

There are many excellent sources in hard copy, CD Rom, and on-line that provide tool kits, references, case examples, guidance, and background materials.²⁵ No need to duplicate what people can discover for themselves when they need particular helpful advice, hints, models, and examples.

Instead, I offer four insights that may prove valuable in your search for what works elsewhere that might be applicable to your own situations.

Insight #1: Search for Leverage Points²⁶

In a brilliant self-published article, Donella Meadows (who died recently of meningitis at much too young an age) described where the most effective places to take action are to produce the greatest impact. She defines these “leverage points” as “places within a complex system (a corporation, an economy, a living body, a city, an ecosystem) where a small shift in one thing can produce big changes in everything.”²⁷

Planners, developers, and affected community people would profit by knowing where to focus their attention so that their decisions can create the biggest difference. So, where are the leverage points in a community system?

The following chart²⁸ lists Dana’s (as most people called Donella Meadows) place to intervene in a system, *in increasing order of effectiveness*. Sort of like David Letterman’s top ten, only there are twelve items.

12. Constants, parameters, numbers (such as subsidies, taxes, standards).
11. The sizes of buffers and other stabilizing stocks, relative to their flows.
10. The structure of material stocks and flows (such as transport networks).
09. The lengths of delays, relative to the rate of system change.

²⁵ Some useful organizations include Community Sustainability Resource Institute (www.sustainable.org), Concern, Inc. (email: concern@igc.apc.org), Green Mountain Institute for Environmental Democracy (www.gmied.org), International Council on Local Environmental Initiatives (www.iclei.org), Redefining Progress (www.rprogress.org), U.S. Department of Energy (www.sustainabledev.nrel.gov), U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (www.epa.gov/ecocommunity), and Maureen Hart at www.sustainablemeasures.org.

²⁶ This insight is based on an article (*Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System*) written by Donella H. Meadows for her Sustainability Institute in December, 1999.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 1.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 3.

08. The strength of negative feedback loops, relative to the impacts they are trying to correct.
07. The gain around driving positive feedback loops.
06. The structure of information flows (who does and does not have access to what).
05. The rules of the system (such as incentives, punishments, constraints).
04. The power to add, change, evolve, or self-organize system structure.
03. The goals of the system.
02. The mindset or paradigm out of which the system arises.
01. The power to transcend paradigms.

Dana's basic argument is that most people focus on the wrong places and miss the major leverage points. Her analogy of a bathtub helps explain a system, where negative and positive feedback loops come into play, and how different actions affect change.²⁹

Water in the bathtub is the "standing stock". Stocks can be physical, such as the amount of water in a reservoir, the amount of money in an account, or the amount of harvested crops on a farm. They can also be non-material stock, such as the perceived safety of a neighborhood or the degree of trust in government officials.

The tub has inflow faucets and an outflow drain that regulate the height and temperature of water. Faucets that are hard to turn or drains that are blocked are examples of constraints (#12). You buy new faucets or unclog a drain, but you are still constrained by the plumbing, the quality and volume of the hot water heater, and the source of water. So, these kinds of improvements have a positive impact but a relatively minor one.

Lakes and ponds, with larger areas from which to draw water as compared to bathtubs, are examples of #11 type changes. More water flows in and out of them than bathtubs because they have larger watersheds feeding them as compared to the pipes supplying water to tubs. The limitation of these kinds of changes is that they are fairly fixed. The storage capacity of a dam, for example, is the concrete dam itself. Also, the larger the stabilizing power of buffers the slower the reaction to change. If businesses have large inventories of products, for example, selling or buying some more items won't have much of an impact on profits.

The structure of systems (#10), such as highways and the number of the baby-boomers, has a significant impact on systems but are hard to change. According to Dana Meadows, "The leverage point is in proper design in the first place. After the structure is built, the leverage is in understanding its limitations and bottlenecks and refraining from fluctuations or expansions that strain its capacity."³⁰

Systems have all kinds of delays in feedback loops (#9). Take the bathtub example. You can turn on the hot water faucet and still stand in cold water until the hot water moves through the pipes from the basement to your shower on the second floor. In another example, there are delays from cleaning up polluted waters or lands before they return to health and can be put to productive use. There are delays between the initial construction of a housing project and the

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 4 and 5.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 8.

move-in by tenants. These often are known and calculable delays; sometimes, they can be shortened or extended depending on people's desires. Often, however, they are a fact of life and, therefore, are less potent leverage points.

Self-correcting negative feedback loops (#8) focus on information flows more than physical ones. For example, a thermostat setting can adjust room temperatures so that the heater turns on when the temperature is too low and shuts off when the desired temperature is reached. Many government regulations are designed as negative feedback loops to force compliance. The Toxic Use Release Inventory (TURI), for example, obligates major generators of pollutants to record and publicize these amounts. The result from this public information is a reduction in toxic use. The ultimate objective is to reduce negative forces rather than accelerate desired improvements.

Self-reinforcing, positive feedback loops (#7) are, therefore, a more effective leverage points than are self-correcting, negative ones. "Positive feedback loops are sources of growth, explosion, erosion, and collapse in systems. Dana Meadow's recommendation is to look for leverage points around "birth rates, interest rates, erosion rates, 'success to the successful' loops, any place where the more you have of something, the more you have the possibility of having more."³¹

The rules of systems (#5) are clearly powerful leverage points. Planners and developers are bound by all sorts of formal rules, such as zoning, economic incentives and disincentives, and building code requirements as well as informal, societal rules of behavior that affect image, reputation, and support or opposition for proposed actions.

The fourth most potent leverage point deals with self-organization (#4), the power to add, change, and evolve. People, plants, animals, and other living organisms share an ability to adapt to changing conditions for their own survival; though this capacity is altered by planning and development actions that undermine or strengthen biodiversity.

As species become endangered or threatened by habitat losses and disruptions from human development, they change. They may be able to migrate for a while to more suitable conditions, but eventually they cannot compete and die. Their loss is our loss, especially as pioneer scientific explorations are finding human health value in non-human organisms.

Planners, developers, and community development people can choose, however, to restore or regenerate sites through their development decisions and actions. The wetland on-site can be restored by grading and plantings rather than filled in and paved over. Perhaps, the healthy wetland can then serve as a natural pollution filter for run-off from the new development.

Anyone aware of systems thinking has heard of the term "paradigm". It is the big picture. "Paradigms are the sources of systems. From them, from shared social agreements about the nature of reality, come system goals and information flows, feedbacks, stocks, flows and everything else about systems."³² People talk about "paradigm shifts", referring to the major

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 12.

³² *Ibid*, p. 18.

changes in mindsets. Sustainability, for example, is a paradigm shift from traditional thinking. Sustainable development promotes a very different set of goals, approaches, outcomes, tools, and indicator measurements from conventional development.

The four characteristics of a more sustainable community mentioned earlier provide clear examples of how much a philosophical paradigm shift is implied in the concepts of sustainability, sustainable development, and sustainable community. Let's consider one example. Bottom-lines are still sought and economic viability is one of these. However, "financial viability" from a sustainability perspective is totally different from "economic growth" based on the current economic theories, models, and practices. A sustainable economy is predicated on livable wages, access to jobs and careers for all people, non-monetary as well as dollar exchanges, long-term as well as short-term considerations, economic wellbeing for local merchants, dollars circulating within the community, life-long learning, skills building, and leadership training, and a host of other specific ingredients that are missing from a quarterly profit statement.

THE most effective leverage point, according to Dana Meadows, is the power to transcend paradigms. By this spiritual pathway, people are open to paradigms that differ from their own and are not constrained by their own paradigm. Hard to imagine that a collective community could ever reach anywhere near this state of being and operating. This would be the ultimate tolerant society.

Insight #2: Find the Tipping Points

Author Malcolm Gladwell describes a concept called "the tipping point" patterned after the study of epidemics.³³ Epidemiologists have a word for the point "at which an ordinary and stable phenomenon – a low-level flu outbreak – can turn into a public health crisis. Every epidemic has its tipping point, and to fight an epidemic you need to understand what that point is."³⁴

Gladwell cites examples illustrating how, in community life, one can identify the appropriate tipping point and, in so doing, prevent the problem from escalating out-of-control. In one famous experiment, conducted more than thirty years ago by Stanford University psychologist Philip Zimbardo, a car was parked on a street in Palo Alto. It was untouched for a week. Simultaneously, another car of the same make and year was parked in a comparable neighborhood but its license plates were removed and its hood was propped open. Within a day, the car was totally stripped. To confirm his hypothesis, the first car's windows were broken and it, too, was vandalized. Visible evidence of damage was the tipping point.³⁵

Many people know that William J. Bratton, former New York City Police Commissioner, turned the tide of violence by a new policing policy. Gladwell claims that this policy was based on applying the theory of epidemics to human behavior. He suggests that the success in New

³³ *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell printed in the New Yorker magazine (June 3, 1996). It is available on-line at www.malcolmgladwell.com/1996.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 3 (from the website version).

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 8.

York was due to interceding aggressively to reduce criminal behavior to a certain level (i.e., the tipping point for each neighborhood) so that crime didn't feed on itself but lessened. Officers in North Brooklyn and the 75th Precinct stopped more cars; confiscated more guns; closed down drug dealers, and broke up loiterers. The result was a dramatic reduction in crimes.³⁶

The "tipping point" concept applies to planning and development decisions by incorporating social science theory into siting, maintenance, and use choices. For example, it is possible to design schools and schoolyards to discourage graffiti and loitering which, in turn, can reduce petty crimes and absenteeism. In another example, the decision to provide free public events in large urban open spaces such as Central Park in New York City and the Boston Gardens made these places safer at night for everyone. In fact, the perception of Central Park changed, encouraging people to use it for many activities day and evening.

In a third example, the investment in maintenance prevents vandalism of parks, bridges, statues and other public properties as well as saves in costly repairs. Some graffiti, peeled paint, and broken benches can be tolerated, and people will still pick up their own garbage and sit on nearby benches. However, there is a tipping point when people stop caring and add to the damages. We need to find those tipping points and plan, design, use, and maintain accordingly.

Insight #3: Don't Just Achieve Success; Work Hard to Sustain It

Many people work hard to reach a level of success and then forget to continue their efforts as new changes take place. They focus their energies elsewhere. I discovered this fact of life when investigating for a new applied education, research, and implementation project aimed at revitalizing and sustaining urban centers.³⁷ "Mature" urban centers are the perceived success stories; places such as Harvard Square in Cambridge, MA, the waterfront section of Portland, Maine, downtown Burlington, Vermont, and many other urban centers across the United States. They have low rental vacancy rates, low crime rates, many social and cultural activities during the week and weekends in all four seasons, accessible public transportation, and a variety of mixed-uses (i.e., residential, commercial, and institutional).

From anecdotal tales, they also seem to be experiencing consequences due to their success, such as gentrification, traffic congestion, inflated prices, and movement of peoples coming and going.

Two key concerns emerge even from a fairly cursory understanding of mature urban centers:

1. Equity -- How can all stakeholders, especially long-time residents, people on limited incomes, small business renters and owners, stay and benefit from the center's vitality as rents and cost-of-living increase?

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 8 and 9.

³⁷ The Revitalizing and Sustaining Urban Center Project is under the auspicious of The Sustainable Communities Program at Tufts University. For more information about this project, contact the author.

2. Prevention – How can people prevent the erosion of the qualities that they worked so hard to achieve, i.e., balance of residential, commercial, and institutional uses; human-scale; historical character blended with contemporary styles; diversity of uses and users; and community-oriented?

To begin to answer these questions, we need to know more about the centers that have progressed beyond creation and revitalization to reach a different phase in their evolution. We need to learn more about what are mature urban centers. What are generic qualities common to this type of urban center, regardless of where it is located, its history, its culture, and its current economic conditions? What are the forces (i.e., economic, political, social) that affect them? We know that depressed urban centers share certain common characteristics that can be influenced by designating them as government-approved Enterprise Zones or targets of economic opportunity, selecting them as Main Streets under the National Trust for Historic Preservation program, and creating Community Policing programs. So, what can be adjusted to break the cycle of down and up and down turns?

The same predicament occurs with natural resources as with the built environment. Millions of dollars, innumerable court suits, and incalculable person hours are invested in cleaning up harbors, waterfronts, lakes, ponds, wetlands, watersheds, and airsheds. Once they are sufficiently healthy wildlife, marine life, and people return to enjoy the benefits. But, the very people who were there during the tough times – when the water was smelly or the property values deflated – are often unable to stay because of the increased costs of living in a desirable place. Isn't it paradoxical that the poor people living in Boston's inner city neighborhoods helped pay for over 95% of the costs of cleaning up Boston Harbor and are now forced to leave their rental apartments because these properties are now magnets for the empty-nesters from the suburbs who flock to a safer, cleaner city?

Of equal concern is the lack of planning. When land is cheap, people don't foresee their eventual value. As a result, planning studies, rezoning actions, acquisition of key parcels are not done when the costs are lower and the results can benefit people on fixed or lower incomes. There are intervention actions that can be taken when an urban center is still in crisis that will have long-term payoff value in terms of economic diversity, historic preservation, cultural richness – the very qualities that people seek in successful mature urban centers.

So, my plea is for planners and developers to look ahead and act as if their community site/s are whole, attractive, desirable, and valuable. Maybe the next generation of urban centers can then break the cycle of the current crop and prevent the erosion of their character and community "soul".

Insight #4: Use Outside Experts as Coaches

My final insight returns to the analogy of co-active coaching. Let's go beyond community participation and involvement towards community responsibility and accountability. For people long accustomed to minimal or no power who are used to living with the dictates of others or the professional guidance of outside experts, this transition will be extremely difficult. It is challenging to shift from victim to responsible party.

One technique that can make a major contribution towards this change is the role of a co-active coach. Planners, particularly, can play the role of co-active coaches. They can

- help draw out the viewpoints of people in communities;
- listen to their concerns;
- find out what problems people want to work on;
- ask probing questions that move discussions along;
- provide challenges, at critical moments, to get people committed to taking a particular action;
- stay engaged over a long enough time period so that trust can be developed, community confidence can be built, and responsibility can be assumed;
- help people in communities understand their potential, as individuals and as a collective identity (i.e., seeing the community as whole and not broken);
- help understand the community as a system and provide guidance to decision-makers about their choices and consequences of their decisions;
- ensure that the full range of sustainable community issues are confronted (i.e., economic security, ecological integrity, quality of life, and empowerment with responsibility); and
- keep their own assumptions, solutions, and values invisible – or at least in check.

CONCLUSION

This paper is a work in progress, espousing ideas that are still forming. It is intended to spur discussions, encourage experiments, and lead to sharing lessons learned. The ultimate conclusion is that the current approach to community-building is not adequate, and needs to be replaced with a goal to create and sustain livable, healthy communities.