

Principle-based Planning for Sustainable Communitiesⁱ

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Sustainable communities must create and maintain an accommodating social, economic, and natural environment for a desirable quality of life, over time, indefinitely. Sustainable communities don't evolve naturally from the pursuit of individual economic self-interests; they must be created and sustained by the conscious and purposeful decisions of people working together for the common good. Sustainable municipalities must continually reassess the ecological, social, and economic assets of their communities, and through the processes of local governance, nurture a continuing culture of sustainability. The community planning process is important, but planning can be effective only if it is guided by a shared sense of purpose and common understanding of the principles necessary to achieve that purpose.

Each community is different, with different resources, capacities, visions, and capabilities. Thus, the developmental goals, plans, and strategies of each municipality must be tailored to the community. However, the basic purpose and principles of sustainability are not arbitrary or voluntary. They are inviolable laws of nature and natural law that must guide all sustainable societies. Sustainable community development must be planned and guided by a common set of principles.

Rural municipalities face unique and difficult challenges in planning for and developing sustainable rural communities. The ecological, cultural, and *common* economic resources of rural North America have been systematically plundered and polluted by the pursuit of *individual* economic wealth. If rural municipalities are to restore and sustain the wealth of their communities, they must renew and restore the natural and social capital from which all economic capital ultimately arises.

To understand the challenges confronting rural communities today, we need to understand why people historically have chosen to live in rural places. The indigenous people of North America lived in rural areas because that's where they hunted and gathered their food and materials for clothing and shelter. Indigenous population density in specific areas reflected the local availability of food and other essential materials. European immigrants brought a distinctly different culture, but they settled in rural America for the same basic purposes, to realize the inherent value of natural resources located in rural areas. Those resources included wildlife, timber, and minerals, but perhaps most important, fertile farmland. European settlements in specific areas reflected locally available resources, as new communities sprang up to support fur trading, logging, mining, and farming. Unlike earlier hunting and gathering cultures, the agricultural and industrial culture of the Europeans allowed rural people to produce large

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surpluses of fur, lumber, minerals, and food. These surpluses supported growing urban centers, which were linked economically, but not geographically or socially, to America's rural areas.

People in rural communities, however, remained dependent on the productivity of their *local* resources. As the fur-bearing animals were killed off, the timber logged off, and the minerals mined out, the most persistent of America's rural populations proved to be in its farming communities. A few logging and mining communities remain and some rural communities today are supported by recreational or residential developments, linked to local natural attractions or nearby urban centers. However, most rural communities in North America today are the remnants of farming communities – rural centers of economic and social activity, which still support and are supported by families on nearby farms and ranches.

I refer to farming communities as *remnant* communities, because like the fur trading, logging, and mining communities before them, the communities that remain dependent on farming are being used up, or “farmed out.” The productivity of the farmland and farming people is being extracted and exploited for the benefit of outside investors, leaving the local people with no sustainable source of economic development, or in many cases, even economic survival. As agriculture has adopted the industrial strategies of mining and manufacturing – specialization, standardization, and consolidation of control – agricultural productivity has increased, but rural communities have been left in decline and decay – used up, farmed out.

When we consider the historic purpose of rural communities, we begin to understand that the increases in unemployment, poverty, and public dependency in rural areas are all symptoms of the continued extraction of economic wealth from rural areas. Erosion of soil, degradation of landscapes, and pollution of air and water are all symptoms of the continued extraction of the natural wealth from rural areas. Increasing conflict, physical abuse, drug use, and crime in rural areas are all symptoms of the continued exploitation of common civility or social wealth of rural areas. Rural areas are being robbed of their natural resources and their social culture– the economic, social, and natural resources needed to sustain both current and future generations of rural people. The younger generation, sensing intuitively that something is deeply wrong, are abandoning rural communities, and thus robbing rural communities of their most precious resource – their children. It should be intuitively obvious that the continued extraction and exploitation of the natural and human resources of rural areas quite simply is not sustainable.

Many rural municipalities are so desperate for new jobs and a new tax base they will grasp at almost any economic opportunity. Rebuilding an economy from within is a long, slow process and many rural people are simply unwilling to invest the necessary time and effort to develop from within. Unfortunately, outside investors see rural communities, with their open spaces and sparse population, as ideal places to locate things that urban people simply won't accept in their neighborhoods. Some rural communities compete for prisons, while others are willing to settle for landfills for urban waste or toxic waste incinerators. Those who miss these “opportunities” are almost certain to be courted by agribusinesses looking for places to locate their giant contract confinement animal feeding operations.

All these so-called rural development strategies allow a few local people to benefit, but only at the expense of others who live nearby, downwind, or downstream. However, those who

benefit most are the outside corporate investors who need some place to dump the wastes from their profit-making enterprises. It seems to be okay in rural communities for some people to get ahead economically, even if others do not. But when some people benefit at the expense of others, it seems to violate an important rural ethic. This ethical offense inevitably leads to social conflicts among community members, which eventually split the social fabric of the community. Many rural communities are rapidly losing their ability to work together through governance for their common good of the community. A community with no shared commitment to a common future quite simply is not sustainable.

Some people are uncomfortable with the concept of *sustainable* development because it suggests that conventional approaches to development are *not sustainable*. Eventually, however, we must confront the facts that development driven solely by the economic bottom line, quite simply, is not sustainable. This lack of sustainability is derived from some of the most fundamental laws of science. Every activity of benefit to humans involves the use of energy, including energy expended by humans. According to the second law of thermodynamics, the law of entropy, each time energy is used or reused, some of its *usefulness* is lost. Even when energy is used most efficiently and all wastes are recycled, some energy is inevitably lost to entropy.

Our capitalist economy provides strong economic incentives to use and even reuse energy to produce things of economic value, but the economy provides no incentive to do anything to offset the inevitable loss of energy to entropy. All economic productivity, being useful human activity, depends on the extraction of energy from either nature or society. So when the resources of nature and society are degraded and depleted, there will be no source for future economic productivity. Unfortunately, there is no economic incentive to maintain the productivity of natural resources or the civility of society for the benefit of some unknown someone of some future generation. Economic benefits are inherently individualistic in nature and thus must accrue to the individual investor or decision maker within his or her lifetime. It makes no economic sense to invest in either nature or society for the benefit of someone in some future generation.

People can give consideration to their social and ethical responsibilities in making economic decisions. But as large publicly owned corporations, rather than real people, control more of the investment decisions in rural areas, short run economics will take greater precedence over social and ethical values. Corporations have no sense of social or ethical responsibility; they exist to maximize economic returns to their stockholders. Development motivated solely by economic interests eventually will use up or deplete the natural and human resources upon which all economic development ultimately depends. An economy driven by economic self-interests quite simply is not sustainable.¹

Sustainable communities must be built on a fundamentally different approach, paradigm, and philosophy. Sustainable development must mimic the processes of living, biological systems. Living plants have the capacity to capture and store solar energy to offset the energy lost to entropy. In fact, all living things have both a natural capacity and natural tendency for renewal and regeneration, with or without any economic incentive to do so.² Obviously, an individual life is not sustainable because every living thing eventually dies. But, communities of living individuals clearly have the capacity to be productive, and at the same time, devote a significant

part of their life's energy to conceiving and nurturing the next generation, thus sustaining the life of the community. For example, people have the capacity and natural tendency to reproduce, even though there is little economic incentive to raise children. Living things – plants, animals, families, communities, societies – are clearly capable of recreation and permanence as well as productivity. Communities, being living systems, must utilize their inherent capacities for both production and regeneration.

A difficult time of transition lies ahead as rural economies move from industrial to sustainability paradigms for development. Sustainable development and industrial development are fundamentally different because living organizations are fundamentally different from industrial organizations both in their *purpose* for being and in the *principles* that guide their functions. The basic purpose of all industrial organizations is productivity, and they continually specialize, standardize, and consolidate control to achieve productivity. Ever-greater productivity in a capitalist economy is achieved through the relentless pursuit of profits and growth. In summary, the purpose of the industrial organization is *productivity* and its guiding principles are *profits* and *growth*. If rural municipalities are to survive this transition, they must choose strategies consistent with sustainability rather than grasp at every opportunity for short run economic development – motivated by profits and growth.

The purpose of sustainable development is *permanence* – to create and maintain a social, economic, and natural environment for a desirable quality of life, over time, indefinitely, forever. Non-human communities are *designed by nature* for permanence. They are naturally productive and regenerative; it's encoded in their DNA. We humans, however, have the unique necessity and capacity to choose the purposes of our organizations, including our communities. The purposes of human communities must be intentionally encoded in their guiding principles, not only local culture but also in local governance. Thus for sustainable human communities, the purpose of permanence is not predetermined, but instead is a matter of collective choice. The people of many rural American communities, over the years, have chosen short-run productivity over long run sustainability, although perhaps unwittingly, and those communities today are reaping the natural consequences of past choices. To create sustainable communities, the people of rural America must choose the purpose of permanence.

The principles necessary for permanence are ecological, social, and economic integrity. These principles are encoded both in “Natural Law” and in the “Laws of Nature,” which define the *rightness* of relationships among humans and between humans and their natural environment. Laws of nature have been defined in philosophy as “the ‘principles’ which govern the natural phenomena of the world.”³ Some philosophers consider the principles of nature to be necessary for nature to fulfill its *purpose*, while others admit only that principles describe how the world works, period, denying any specific purpose for the principles. Regardless, the Laws of Nature are inviolable principles, which cannot be changed and have inevitable consequences in all relationships between humans and their natural environment.

Natural Laws, on the other hand, are the principles that govern relationships among humans. Natural Laws include ethical and moral principles, which determine whether human thoughts and actions are right or wrong, or good or bad.⁴ The principles of Natural Law have been variously related to the basic nature of being human, to God or some supreme being, or to the

nature of the cosmos and the place of humans within it.⁵ Regardless, Natural Law exists independently of any given religion, culture, society, or political order – applying to all people of all times. Principles of Natural Law are expressed in such historic documents as the Magna Carta, where certain human rights are described as being *inherent* or *self-evident*. Natural Laws are the common sense of people regarding *rightness* in human relationships.

The principles needed to guide human communities toward permanence can be derived from the ecological, social, and economic principles that must guide sustainable living ecosystems, societies, and economies. A sustainable community must have integrity. Integrity suggests wholeness, completeness, strength, and soundness. Thus, sustainability requires ecological, social, and economic integrity, not only within ecosystems, communities, and businesses, but also among ecosystems, communities, and businesses. The same basic principles must permeate all aspects of a sustainable community, economy, or society.

The sustainability of any particular rural community is inevitably linked to its natural environment because there must be a purpose for people to choose to live and work in that particular place. The first principle of ecology is “everything is interconnected,” from which we can derive the guiding principles for maintaining a healthy, productive natural environment: *holism*, *diversity*, and *interdependence*. The environment is far more than a collection physical and biological elements, including plants, animals, and people. It is an interconnected whole within which the relationships among its component parts are as important as the individual components. Natural ecosystems cannot be dissected into earth, air, water, plants, animals, and people without losing the essence of the system as a whole. People in a sustainable community must relate to their natural environment holistically.

Diversity, across both space and time, is essential in sustaining all biological communities, including human communities. Diversity is necessary for regeneration and renewal, for resilience and resistance, and for the adaptation and evolution needed to accommodate inevitable change. Specialization and standardization increase efficiency and can be found in some measure in all natural ecosystems. But all healthy ecosystems also maintain a high level of flexibility and diversity. Most rural communities today are not suffering from lack of efficiency; they are suffering from over-specialization and over-standardization, the inevitable consequences of their over-reliance on industrial development. Sustainable communities must learn to embrace their physical and biological diversity.

Interdependent relationships are necessary to transform the potential of holism and diversity into positive ecological and social reality. Diverse individuals, communities, and ecosystems are defined by their selective boundaries. These boundaries, whether they define a biological or a social community, must be semi-permeable or selective in nature to ensure mutually beneficial relationships among diverse entities. Relationships *within* sustainable ecosystems must be selective. Some elements cannot be allowed to benefit at the expense of others. Relationships *among* biological and social communities must be selective. The community can't let everything in or keep everything out, nor can they let everything out or keep everything in. Individuals and communities must remain open to outside opportunities but closed to outside exploitation. The physical and biological relationships within and among sustainable communities must be interdependent or mutually beneficial.

The principles necessary for mutually beneficial *human* relationships are *trust*, *kindness*, and *courage*. These basic social principles reflect a set of common core values, which transcend religion, philosophy, race, nation, and culture. Different groups of people obviously have different values, but a select group of *core values* is held in common to all groups. The Institute for Global Ethics, for example, has conducted surveys, interviews, and focus groups with diverse groups of people around the world, asking, “What do you think are the core moral and ethical values held in the highest regard in your community?”⁶ Responses varied widely, as would be expected, but five values consistently ranked high in virtually every inquiry: honesty, fairness, responsibility, compassion, and respect.

The core values of honesty, fairness, and responsibility, together define the principle of trust or trustworthiness. People trust people that they believe to be honest and truthful, fair and impartial, and responsible and dependable. As relationships grow in trust, they grow stronger – they build the social energy or social capital needed to sustain the human resources of a community. When trust is diminished, the relationships grow weaker and social capital is depleted. A sustainable community must be built upon relationships of trust.

The core values of respect and compassion, along with empathy, define the principle of kindness. People act with kindness when they are empathetic, when they are able to see themselves in the place of others, and then, to treat the other as they would like to be treated. Kindness is rooted in respect – respecting others, as we would like to be respected by others. Kindness goes beyond impartiality, dependability, and *brutal* honesty, showing compassion whenever mercy is more appropriate than justice. Thus, a sustainable community must be characterized by a common sense of caring and kindness.

Trust and kindness accomplish little without the courage to take action. The social principle of courage is built upon the core values of self-confidence, discipline, and perseverance. It takes courage to form meaningful relationships with other people and persevere through times of inevitable misunderstanding and disappointment. People of courage have self-confidence, a commitment to purpose, and the discipline to live by principles. The people of sustainable communities must find the courage to reject deception, inequity, irresponsibility, ruthlessness, and disrespect. Sustainable communities must be built on a foundation of *moral* courage.⁷

The principles of sustainable local economies include *value*, *productivity*, and *sovereignty*. Economic value is determined by scarcity, meaning the quantity of something available, relative to how much of something else people are willing to and able to give up to get it. Economic value differs from *intrinsic* value in that the economy may place little value on things of great intrinsic value, such as air, ethics, or friendships. Some of the best things in life are free and others are priceless. Money is a common measure of scarcity, because money can be traded for many different things. If people can get all they want of something without buying it, it isn't scarce, and thus, has no economic value. A sustainable community produces things of great direct aesthetic and social value, but it also must produce things that are scarce. A sustainable community must produce economic value.

Economic productivity is the creation of economic value. Production results from the combination of different productive resources, the most basic of which are land, labor, capital, and management. So productivity, like value, is a matter of choices – choosing how much of which resources to use in various production processes. The more effective the allocation of resources, the more productive will be the process. Thus, sustainable communities must make productive use of their land, people, intellect, energy, and money; they must effectively allocate scarce resources among alternative uses. Sustainable communities must use their economic resources productively.

The economic principle of sovereignty receives less attention than value and productivity, but is no less important. Without sovereignty – the freedom to choose – neither a market economy nor a democratic government can function effectively. Sovereign decision makers must have adequate information about alternative choices, and must be free of coercion, persuasion, or unnecessary restrictions. When people are not free to choose, neither economies nor communities can function effectively. Members of sustainable communities must be sovereign – they must be free to choose ecological, social, and economic sustainability.

The integrity of a community, meaning its wholeness, completeness, strength, and soundness, depends on the extent to which the principles of sustainability permeate all aspects of the community. The social community must be more than a collection of individuals. The relationships among individuals must be holistic, diverse, and interdependent. Its social and cultural resources must be used wisely, not just for economic means but to create things of intrinsic social value. Social integrity depends on ecological and economic integrity.

Sustainable relationships between the community and its natural environment can be derived directly from the principles of social relationships. In using the resources of nature, the people of sustainable communities must reflect a sense of kindness and trustworthiness in their relationships with other people, including those of future generations. And natural resources must be used not just to create economic value but also maintain the intrinsic value of living in a clean and healthy natural environment. Ecological integrity depends on social and economic integrity.

A sustainable economy also must be holistic, diverse, and interdependent. A degree of specialization and standardization may be necessary for efficiency, but a sustainable economy must maintain a measure of diversity and economic relationships must be mutually beneficial, rather than extractive or exploitative. Relationships must be based on trust and trustworthiness, not just contracts and laws, and must reflect a sense of kindness toward others, including those of the future. Economic integrity is inseparable from ecological and social integrity.

The sustainability of a community depends on its ecological, social, and economic integrity. However, the most fundamental principles of sustainability transcend ecology, society, and economics. These principles should guide all aspects of our lives, and thus must also guide us toward the creation of a permanent human society. These most fundamental of principles are the timeless principles are faith, love, and hope.

Faith is the ability to believe something that cannot be proven. We accept certain propositions by faith simply because we know in our heart, mind, and soul they are true. It is only by faith, for example, that we know that our life has purpose and meaning. We can't prove it, but we know it is true. Lacking purpose, it would make no difference what we do or don't do, anything would as good as anything else, or nothing at all. Without purpose, life would be meaningless – living would simply make no sense.

Most people probably never question whether our life has purpose, but scientists do. “Scientific materialism,” which dominates modern scientific thought, “asserts that all events are due to the interaction of matter and motion, acting by blind necessity in accordance with those invariable sequences to which we have given the name laws.”⁸ To the scientist, human life is nothing more than a thoughtless interaction of motion and matter, lacking in any sense of human intellect, self-will, and feelings, insofar as these things are supposed to be different from material processes. In the science that has driven industrial development, there is no place for faith, and thus, no place for purpose. In science, there is no consideration of the freewill of humans to consciously choose the purpose of permanence rather than blindly pursue their individual self-interest. The people of sustainable communities must be people of faith.

People of faith also have the uniquely human capacity to love and to be loved. To love is to believe, again without proof, in the inherent goodness of a thing. We typically think of love as existing between two humans, but a person can love an animal or even a mechanical object, a car or a dress, if they believe in the inherent goodness of the thing. Love between two people is special because human love can be returned. Love is based more on emotion than on reason. Love affairs blind the lovers, at least temporarily, to each other's faults. But even mature love requires no compelling evidence to support it and does not easily accept evidence against it. True love is a matter of faith.

To love *life* is to believe, without proof, that *life* is good. All sane people believe it is good to live rather than die, and to most people, it is also good for other people and other species to live rather than die. Otherwise, the continuation of life on earth would not be inherently good. We know that no individual life lasts forever; all living things eventually die. But we know also that when the purpose of a life has been fulfilled, the goodness of that life has been fulfilled, and with no further purpose, death is a good end to life. But we accept by faith that continuing life on earth is good, even after our individual life has ended.

To love life is to love the whole of life, because we are all part of the same web of life – the same creation. We are all made and remade of the same molecules, matter, and energy; we are all related and interconnected by the processes of life at the most basic level. The purposes of all living things are interrelated with the purposes of other living things; and part of the purpose of all life is to conceive and to nurture new life – to sustain life.

Without love of life, there is no personal sense of ecological, social, or economic responsibility for those who will live on earth at some distant time in the future. Without love of life, the purpose of permanence or sustainability makes no sense. To create sustainable communities, we must find the courage to reflect our love for others and our love of life in all of our thoughts and actions. The people of sustainable rural communities must be loving people.

The final principle of sustainability is hope. In defining hope, I defer to a quote from Vaclav Havel – philosopher, reformer, and former president of the Czech Republic.

Hope is not the same as joy when things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but rather an ability to work for something to succeed. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It's not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. It is this hope, above all, that gives us strength to live and to continually try new things, even in conditions that seem hopeless. Life is too precious to permit its devaluation by living pointlessly, emptily, without meaning, without love and, finally, without hope.⁹

The people who create sustainable rural communities will be people of hope. Even if they know the odds are against them, even if they know the road will be difficult and fraught with difficulties and disappointments, they will know that the purpose and principles of sustainability make sense, regardless of how their individual plans and strategies may turn out. In this, they will find hope. They will know they must continue to try new things, even in situations that otherwise would seem hopeless. They will know something good is possible. And in this, people of purpose and principle will always find hope.

Principle-based planning for sustainable communities at first may seem too abstract or philosophical to be practical. However, nothing is more practical than creating communities that accommodate lives of ecological, social, and economic integrity. There is no scarcity of imagination, creativity, or entrepreneurship in America today. The challenge is to know what kinds of things to imagine, create, and develop. Successful communities must create an environment in which people can find happiness – can pursue a desirable quality of life. There is no more desirable life than a life of ecological, social, and economic integrity.

Americans are searching for relationships of integrity today, in the places where they live, in the people with whom they live, and in the things that they buy. There is a scarcity of integrity and things that are scarce have economic value. People can find communities where people are competitive, aggressive, and assertive almost everywhere. Communities that value integrity and reward it are few and far between. Rural municipalities that provide a nurturing environment for relationships of integrity will stimulate the necessary imagination, creativity, and entrepreneurship needed to give birth to a dynamic, living process of sustainable community development. Success from within will attract successful people from outside who are looking for a desirable place to live and to grow. The principles of ecological, social, and economic integrity will guide the community development process toward sustainability.

Perhaps most importantly, the people who create and nurture the new sustainable rural communities will be people of faith, love, and hope. They will be people who believe that life has purpose. They will be people who believe in the basic goodness of life. They will be people who believe that a good life is possible, for all people of all generations. We here tonight are among the people of faith, love, and hope. Otherwise, we would not have bothered to come here. We know our lives simply would not make sense if we had no purpose to pursue and no principles to guide us, regardless of how much or how little we are able to achieve. We know our

lives are simply too precious to live without faith, without love, and finally, without hope. In planning for sustainability, communities must be always be guided by the faith, love, and hope.

End Notes:

¹ John Ikerd, *Sustainable Capitalism; A Matter of Common Sense* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, Inc., 2005)

² For a more in depth discussion of living systems, see Ikerd, *Sustainable Capitalism*, Chapter 5.

³ *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "Laws of Nature," <http://www.iep.utm.edu/lawofnat.htm#H1>.

⁴ William Hamilton, *Essays in Edinburgh Review*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Review, 1829), 32.

⁵ *Wikipedia*, "Natural Law," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natural_law

⁶ Rushworth M. Kidder, *Moral Courage* (New York: William Morrow, HarperCollins Publishers, 2005), 43.

⁷ Kidder, *Moral Courage*.

⁸ Hugh Elliott, "Materialism," in *Readings in Philosophy*, eds. John Herman Randall, Jr., Jestus Buchler, and Evelyn Shirk (New York Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc., 1972), 307.

⁹ Vaclav Havel.1990. *Disturbing the Peace* (New York: Random House inc.), Chapter 5.