Consensus Building for Sustainable Communities

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C onsensus-building can play a role in creating and maintaining sustainable communities. This article focuses on that role in achieving sustainability at the level of local communities, particularly in the context of United States planning practice. A design for sustainable consensus is proposed that addresses the *process* of developing public policy and describes the primary *issues* raised by the concept of sustainability and the key characteristics of the desired project *outcomes*. Examples from several community planning programs illustrate the application of this model to communities of diverse size, character, and geographic location.

Consensus-Building and Sustainable Communities

Sustainable communities result from many individual decisions made by residents, businesses, community organizations, and governments. Public policy, as expressed by community plans, policies, and programs, can help create sustainable communities because it informs and shapes these decisions. The use of a consensus-based process to create public policy offers important advantages to communities concerned about sustainability.

To many planners and community leaders, consensus-building evokes an image of large groups of people

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discussing issues endlessly, without reaching a decision--the ultimate sustainable meeting! In fact, consensus can be an essential tool in shaping a community's approach to meeting current and future needs.

Sustainability is a concept of global significance, but effective action toward sustainability must occur locally. Sustainable development requires that resources be used in ways which retain a resource base for use by future generations. On a global scale, the United States and other "developed" countries bear responsibility for a substantial amount of resource use. With 26 percent of the world's population, the "developed" countries account for 38 percent of the world's daily protein consumption, 79 percent of annual steel consumption, and 80 percent of commercial energy use.[1] Decisions made individually by residents, businesses, and local communities determine the collective level of resource use. Each day, individuals make choices: will a soft drink container be discarded or recycled, will the trip to work be made as a single occupant in an automobile or as part of a carpool, how much non-renewable energy will be used to heat a home to a comfortable level on a winter day? Choices about the design of a community--its public policy regarding development--contribute to the level of resource consumption by residents and businesses in that community. Since three-quarters of Americans live in urban areas,[2] the consumption choices made by city residents have a significant effect on the overall level of national resource consumption.

Local public policy choices can limit (or enhance) an individual's ability to use resources in a sustainable way. If a community offers curbside recycling, the choice to recycle a soft drink container becomes more attractive to the consumer. If travel to an employment centers is only possible by auto, even an individual who

would prefer a shorter bicycle ride or a commute via light rail will be unable to exercise these choices. Since building design and siting affect energy needs for heating, the use of climate-appropriate building designs and subdivision standards that take advantage of solar heating can assist in accomplishing the desired result of a comfortable home with a lower level of non-renewable energy use.

Governments themselves, as consumers of resources, can use their own decisions to support a more sustainable pattern. In addition to the choices made about daily consumption levels, local public policy can affect another aspect of sustainable choice--the decision to remain in an existing community or to move to a newly-developing area. Each existing community represents the commitment of resources for capital construction, the use of land for urban development, and a historic investment in systems of travel, communication, and institutions. The resources thus invested are not readily returned to other uses. If communities remain attractive to residents and businesses, these resources will continue to contribute to long-term quality of life. If not, individuals will choose to move to new communities, requiring new resource investment in the systems, land use, and infrastructure necessary for a city. Unless our existing communities are sustainable, in terms of continuing quality of life, individual choices will make past investments ineffective. They will continue consumption patterns that, ultimately, will not be sustainable because the next generation will have neither sustainable "quality of life assets" in existing communities nor natural resource reserves to be able to design appropriate sustainable alternatives.

The processes used to develop public policy affect the sustainability of the result. At the local community level, many public policy decisions are made by a city council or similar elected body. The "majority-rule" process represented by a city council's vote on any particular issue sets public policy. However, the process leading to a vote will have a significant effect on the durability of the decision and hence, on the sustainable use of any resources invested as a result.

Decisions made without the participation of key affected groups are not likely to be supported or followed by those groups. Particularly if the decisions limit consumption, these groups will seek to overturn them. If the decisions require individual action, these groups may prevent implementation by choosing not to participate. Finally, decisions made by a small majority (the 51 percent vote) may well be overturned or reversed through the efforts of groups on the losing side of the vote. Such policy reversals mean resource investment in projects or programs that are abandoned before they are completed, that are not fully used, or that compete with one another. These reversals result in additional resource consumption with little or no quality of life benefit. When multiplied by the thousands of communities in this country, these decisions mean greater consumption and less sustainability.

"Consensus" is a concept for which there are many interpretations. One useful way to describe a consensus result is that everyone agrees to live with it, even though it may not be the ideal solution for any individual participant. Key aspects of the concept include:

· Inclusion of all affected parties ("everyone" means all those who are affected or have a stake in the outcome);

· An agreement that the parties will not try to overturn the decision, not an agreement that signifies full support of all concepts; and

· An outcome that is mutually beneficial--it adequately meets the short- and long-term needs of the parties.

Such a consensus agreement requires that all issues be considered. Participants must make trades between available options. This negotiation process enables participants to consider the long-term implications of their decisions. If successful, it creates a broad base of community support for the outcome, a level of support that is essential if the policy direction is to be maintained. In addition, this support should translate into participant willingness to make individual choices that support the consensus result.

These features of a consensus result are valuable for any public policy decision. For issues of sustainability, they become even more important. By maintaining consistent public policy, the community can invest resources in ways which will provide the greatest benefit to current residents while retaining options for future generations. By creating a broad base of support, all the individuals, businesses, and groups involved in the process are more likely to make their own choices consistent with the consensus agreement, thereby increasing sustainability. By considering all affected groups and resolving disputes in ways which consider future needs, a consensus-building process supports community quality of life which, in turn, enhances community sustainability.

A Design for Sustainable Consensus

The Process

Design of a decision-making process does not guarantee that the process results will reflect a consensus nor that they will prove to be sustainable over the long term. However, thoughtful process design can increase the likelihood that the end result will have these characteristics. Process design must be appropriate to the decision at hand. A process for developing a twenty-year comprehensive plan will differ from a process to decide operational issues for a community recycling operation. The six process recommendations below describe factors that should be considered in any public discussion to increase the opportunity for consensus and enhance the sustainability of the results.

1. Include All Affected Groups

The individuals and groups that will be affected by the decision, the "stakeholders", must be involved in the discussion and the consensus-building process. Each group brings a particular expertise and perspective to the discussion. Their participation means that these resources are used in addressing the issue. Their contributions help the process reach an outcome that maintains community quality of life, as perceived by all community members. Their support for the outcome means that the decision is less likely to be reversed after resources have been invested. Their agreement with the outcome leads to a willingness to implement it, at the level of individual and community action.

Inclusion of stakeholders can be accomplished in several different ways. One effective method is creation of a representative citizens' committee. For example, the City of Austin, Texas used a Steering Committee to develop *Austinplan*, a comprehensive plan the community prepared in the mid-1980's. Nine interest groups were identified to serve on the committee: Business and Finance; Cultural Affairs; Environmentalists; Ethnic Minorities; Human Services; Neighborhoods and Geographic Sectors; Public Institutions; Real Estate and Development; and Community at Large. The number of representatives for each group was based on the need to balance committee representation.

Interest group members were sought in two ways. Announcements in the local newspaper invited interested persons to submit an application describing their areas of interest/expertise. In addition, organizations representing certain interests, such as the Austin Chamber of Commerce, were asked to recommend three representatives for their interest group. Several hundred applications were received. The Austin City Council reviewed these applications and appointed a committee of 94 persons reflecting these diverse interests. This large group of representatives worked together, through a complex process, to propose planning policies for the City.

2. Consider Community Capacity

When the *Austinplan* process began, the community had many active organizations and a history of citizen participation in local government. Community participation in *Austinplan* involved the Steering Committee, fourteen subject area Task Groups and 24 geographic area Sector Plan organizations. The City's budget was able to accommodate the staff support and other resources for this massive public involvement project. As a result, this effort was generally consistent with the community's capacity to manage and support an extensive consensus-building process.[3]

Many communities lack the capacity in terms of staffing, funding, institutional organization, and participant expertise to carry out a process of this magnitude. Design of the process should be tailored to represent interest groups at the level that can be supported by existing community capacity. Jackson County, Missouri[4] found that a process of workshops with local community leaders, residents, and property owners, coordinated through the County Plan Commission, was effective in obtaining the participation of the interest groups affected by the County's first Master Plan. The consensus developed through this process is illustrated by the groups' support of the plan which resulted, by the plan's unanimous Plan Commission recommendation, and by its unanimous adoption by the County Legislature in 1994.

An effective consensus-building process may increase capacity for community involvement and expand knowledge about the implications of community decisions for sustainability. However, the process should be designed so it can succeed with existing capacity alone. Creation of additional capacity can be an added benefit but should not be necessary for process success.

3. Insist on Elected Officials' Involvement

A public policy process is normally initiated by elected officials. The continuing involvement of these officials is vital to the creation of a sustainable process outcome. Sustainable development, since it retains some resources for future generations, often involves limitations on resource use today. Governmental limits

on individual choices typically spark controversy. The elected officials must understand the rationale for these limits if they are to enact them and continue to support and implement them. In the case of Jackson County, the continuing involvement of the County Executive Marsha Murphy, who initiated the County's Master Plan project, was instrumental to its success.

4. Clearly Define Roles & Expectations

The concept of long-term sustainability has all the ingredients of a difficult public policy decision: the issues are complex, the results will occur over a long time period, there is uncertainty about technical aspects of the issues, and there are factors beyond the control of the local community. A consensus-building process can heighten participants' concerns and skepticism about their ability to affect results. For this reason, realistic expectations should be communicated and acknowledged at the outset.

First, participant roles must be clearly defined, consistent with community capabilities. Second, expectations, in terms of time commitment, areas for public involvement, and expected product, must be described when the process begins; modifications during the process must be communicated consistently to all participants.

In structuring a sustainable consensus process, questions about roles and expectations include:

· What are the citizen participants being asked to do? Are they to become technical experts? Are they to state a broad vision and general goals, or are they to provide specific, program-level recommendations?

· What role will the government's staff play? Will they manage meeting and schedule logistics? How much new technical analysis and professional evaluation will they provide during this process?

· How will elected and appointed officials be involved? If there are other participants, such as volunteer facilitators, what will they do?

· What issues will this process address? What choices do participants have in dealing with issues that lack complete technical information?

· What are the process deadlines? What results are expected and at what level of detail?

· What is meant by consensus in this process? What procedures will be used if the participants don't reach complete agreement? What happens if no agreement is reached before the process deadline?

· Who will be responsible for outreach to the identified interest groups? Who will communicate with the community at large? How will the media be involved?

A clear understanding of participant roles and agreement on expectations about the process and its products will encourage participants to make realistic commitments to the project. Process-related disputes can be reduced, allowing all participants to focus on the difficult questions of planning for a sustainable future.

The *Austinplan* process began with written descriptions of the roles of City staff, Steering Committee members, other citizen participants, facilitators, and elected/appointed officials. As the process continued, changes to these roles and to other procedures within the process were debated by an executive committee of participants[5] and then communicated in writing to all participants.

5. Use Dispute Resolution Techniques

The process of reaching consensus on a community's future is, essentially, a multi-party negotiation process. If the goal is sustainability, disputes cannot be resolved by agreeing to "give something to everyone". Agreeing to extend sewer service into several new areas, for moderate development of each, may resolve a dispute about which large area to serve. But if a sustainable community is to result, property in some (or most) of these areas may remain undeveloped in the near future. As this issue shows, dispute resolution techniques are even more important to a sustainable consensus process since sustainability may require more difficult trade-offs.

Resources for dispute resolution should be provided to process participants, in the form of information, training, and/or skilled personnel. *Getting to Yes*[6] and *Breaking the Impasse: Consensual Approaches to Resolving Public Disputes*[7] are among the many references that describe dispute resolution techniques appropriate to a public process.

In Austin, one technique for resolving disputes proved especially effective in resolving a dispute between the environmentalists and developers on the task group charged with recommending land use policy. When the appropriate development standards for hillside development could not be resolved in the 30-member task group, each of these interests appointed individuals to represent their viewpoints on this particular issue. The two individuals met and, with the assistance of a facilitator, negotiated a compromise that

provided the opportunity for added development density in exchange for project design that protected natural areas.

A second technique, particularly appropriate for sustainable communities, allows resolution of issues that involve uncertainty about future demands. San Jose, California prepared its *Horizon 2000 General Plan* in the early 1980s, at a time when employment growth in the Silicon Valley area was magnifying San Jose's function as a "bedroom community" for workers employed in other cities. The Coyote Valley area became the focus of pressure to plan new residential development. The resolution of this dispute was a plan that allowed some non-residential development in Coyote Valley, with residential development to follow when certain "trigger" levels of development demand and jobs-housing balance were reached.

6. Make Participation Meaningful

The final process recommendation is one that may seem obvious, but is essential to a sustainable community -- public participation must be meaningful. Many residents are extremely cynical about government's responsiveness and effectiveness. When a process of consensus-building is initiated, these residents are asked to contribute time and resources to develop public policy. If the elected officials do not follow the recommendations that result from such a process, this cynical view of government is strongly reinforced and residents' willingness to participate in implementing any public policy will decrease significantly. This was the case in Austin when a new City Council did not take action on the recommendations made by the *Austinplan* participants.

Decision-makers concerned about creating sustainable communities must be prepared to implement the consensus-based recommendations from the process they establish. If the consensus focuses on a community vision or a goals statement, the government should be prepared to follow up with more detailed planning and implementation programs to achieve these goals. If recommendations establish policy on government programs such as recycling, or development regulation such as passive solar design, the government should be prepared to allocate funds for the program in its operating budget or modify the subdivision regulations to carry out these policies.

A sustainable community is not created, or maintained, by local governments acting alone. Process participants must also be partners in action to achieve the agreed-upon goals. Participating interest groups must be prepared to implement the sustainable consensus results. Meaningful participation means that inter-est groups take action as well. By working together, the participants, both public and private, who shaped the consensus can create the sustainable community that consensus described.

The Issues

The issues addressed in a traditional comprehensive planning process are closely related to the creation of sustainable communities. In planning for sustainability, some of these issues must be presented differently, with different analysis of implications and opportunities for community action. The presentation of these issues can aid in building consensus and should support efforts to create sustainable public policy. Five issues with particular significance to sustainable communities are described below.

1. Public & Private Investment

Capital investment decisions are important to sustainability for several reasons. They involve the use of land and the construction of buildings or other facilities designed for long term use; consequently, they are decisions that are largely irreversible, e.g. once a grassland has been cleared and graded for urban development, return to its natural state is very unlikely. Capital investment decisions also include private owners' choices about the location of a new home or development of a shopping center as well as public choices such as the extension of sewage collection lines or renovation of a central library. These investments often involve a large opportunity cost as well. Investment of a city's capital funds in a new fire station means those funds cannot be spent to renovate an old recreation center.

A traditional comprehensive planning process considers questions of market demand and existing capacity when addressing these investments. Planning for a sustainable community must consider other aspects of these investment decisions:

· Reuse or renovation of existing buildings, facilities and neighborhoods can be viewed as a way to continue the effective use of resources committed by past investments.

· When the long-term costs of service provision, daily resource consumption, and environmental externalities are considered, development of outlying land may be much more costly than its market price suggests.

· The "life-cycle cost" of an investment must be considered, not just the initial capital outlay. By including the costs to operate or use the capital

investment, cost comparisons reflect a more complete picture of consumption. The sustainable investment options are more clearly identified.

By leaving some land undeveloped, natural areas are retained that enhance current residents' quality of life. These areas also retain development options to meet the needs of future generations, for whom current development patterns may not be preferable.

2. Resource Management & Consumption

Local governmental operations and consumption by residents and businesses also use resources. These decisions are relatively reversible when compared to the capital investments discussed above. They are not, however, always addressed in community planning processes. A common approach is to assume that resource consumption will continue at current level of use per capita (or another consumption unit). Planning efforts then determine how large a supply of the resource must be acquired to meet future needs.

These daily choices become more critical to a sustainable planning process because continuation of current consumption patterns can no longer be assumed: there may not be enough of the resource and the reserves that do exist may need to be maintained for future generations. Instead, the sustainable planning process should consider the contribution of consumption to community quality of life. It then should determine whether there are other ways to achieve these quality of life goals. If community residents want attractive, landscaped medians along major roadways, the use of native landscaping or xeriscape may achieve this goal more effectively than operational choices to water, fertilize and mow more frequently.

In addressing consumption issues, participants in a consensus-building process can contribute to the discussion of alternatives to the "standard" or "average" consumption patterns. Rather than accepting the average amount of water use per capita as the basis for planning, participants can consider the range of actual consumption within a community. Process participants with lower use can propose practices that would reduce consumption by the high volume users. In this way, the average is reduced, fewer resources are consumed, and quality of life objectives may still be achieved.

3. Accessibility

In many communities, planning for access means ensuring that roadways are built to handle projected traffic. For a sustainable community, accessibility is a much broader concept, implying access to information and opportunities as well as physical (automobile) access. Without this broader access, some residents become disenfranchised and, over time, polarization of the community will make it a less desirable and less sustainable community.

While the typical planning process focuses on the "bricks and mortar" of roads and other infrastructure, a sustainable planning effort must focus first on the people in a community and on their ability to obtain the information, skills, services, facilities, and other resources that make the community accessible. Again, the sustainable consensus process supports this objective because it includes people whose experience can identify the barriers that exist now. The participation of these individuals is vital if the community of the future is to provide the equality of access and opportunity that are important to a sustainable community.

4. Community Character

A sustainable community reflects its surroundings and its citizens. The climate, topography, and natural resources of an area should affect the characteristics of a community that will be sustainable in its use of local resources and need to import other resources. A community that does not meet its citizens' needs for quality of life, security, identity, and livability will be less sustainable over time because its citizens (as residents and investors) will choose to locate elsewhere. For a typical comprehensive planning process, community character may be a minor aspect of plan implementation, addressed by design review for certain projects. A process for sustainable community planning must give greater importance to this issue. Public involvement, through a consensus-building process, is vital to address this issue effectively. Community participants can identify the features that are most significant to them in defining their community's character. Their evaluation (as 'users' of the city) provides direction that can shape community design to support continuing vitality.

A critical dilemma faced by existing communities in planning for sustainability is the pressure, regionally and nationally, for outward growth and movement to new communities. These trends work against the continuing attractiveness of older cities and, hence, their sustainability as vital communities. Community character issues provide existing communities with the ability to offer distinctive living environments that do not exist in new communities. Existing communities, whether small towns or neighborhoods in larger cities,

enjoy a human scale, a connection with the past, and sense of identity that is often lacking in new areas. By building on these unique aspects of existing community character, a community can offer attractive options for future residents while retaining a scale that is supportive of sustainable development objectives.

5. Quality of Life Links All Issues

For communities in the United States, a sustainable future must include the concept of continuing a desired quality of life. Communities with a perceived decline in quality of life experience disinvestment and out-migration by residents and business owners who can choose among many available locations in this country. Since quality of life relates directly to an individual's experience of a community, the choices made by individuals, businesses, and governments that affect the character of communities will in turn determine whether these communities will be sustainable.

Quality of life is a concept that is affected by the technical issues often addressed in long-range planning--the adequacy of roadways, availability of opportunities for housing development, effectiveness of city emergency response services. Yet quality of life considers these issues in an integrated way, as an individual resident perceives the experience of living in that community. This integrated approach to the issues supports a consideration of sustainability, since these concerns are linked to one another and, in some cases, involve trade-offs in investment decisions. By including overall quality of life considerations in a planning process, the substantive issues can be considered in a way that supports sustainable choices.

Quality of life offers a means to use community involvement effectively as well, since it changes the focus of discussion from one of technical standards to one of the user's experience. This approach can serve to make participation more effective and therefore, increase community support for the result. At the same time, a consensus-building process offers an effective way to make the trade-offs that may be necessary, while remaining consistent with the overall goal of a sustainable quality of life.

The Outcome

A planning process often results in a document--a set of statements. Consensus increases community support for the concepts and recommendations found in the plan; this "buy in" increases the chances for successful implementation. What outcomes are most critical for sustainability?

1. Changes in Investment, Consumption, and Lifestyle

Choices

An effective process of sustainable consensus-building should change community resource use. Understanding of the long-term implications of investment decisions should help governments make more sustainable choices in capital and operating budgets. Efforts to make sustainable lifestyle options available should allow individual residents, business owners, and institutions to make choices that consume less while maintaining or enhancing quality of life and community character. As individuals choose lifestyle options like in-town housing near transit stops, the larger community and the private sector can see the benefits of these options. Over time, individual decisions should support sustainable development patterns. Private and public implementation will be more realistic if the policy is adopted with a broad base of community support.

2. Stable Policy Direction

A decision-making process based on consensus should result in stronger public support for the resultant policy direction. This, in turn, should allow the local government to implement the policy with less risk of community direction shifting dramatically. A sustainable community is a long-term goal; its success will not be apparent within an elected official's term of office. Unless the policy direction remains consistent, the community will be unable to test its effectiveness. The consensus process should result in policy that is more sustainable because it is more stable.

3. Monitoring and Feedback

Monitoring of progress is essential for any long-term program. In Jackson County, Missouri, the Master Plan includes provisions for monitoring development patterns and service demands annually; other communities have established "quality of life indicators" that allow the community to measure progress toward its desired quality of life. The feedback from these monitoring efforts allows the community to determine whether initial implementation has been effective in increasing sustainability. Policies and programs can then be modified as appropriate to accomplish these objectives.

4. Flexible Response to Change

Some changes in community character and growth dynamics cannot be anticipated. New technology, global economics, and other factors may affect a community's efforts to increase sustainability in ways that are not anticipated when a plan is developed. For this reason, a sustainable planning process should include the ability to respond to these changes over

time. In Jackson County, Missouri, for example, the future development plan is illustrated by a 'development diagram' showing the general characteristics of planned development. The plan then describes the character of development in each policy area. As development proposals are made, the plan provides direction yet allows flexibility in the specific details of individual projects. Sustainable community objectives related to service provision and community character can be achieved while responding to changing conditions.

5. Continuing Community Involvement

A sustainable consensus process should result in agreement on policy direction--the substantive consensus. In addition, it should strengthen the community's capacity for involvement and coordinated action on a variety of issues. San Jose, California has successfully built community participation in planning programs. This involvement has allowed the City to work in partnership with neighborhood groups, business organizations, and other interested parties to prepare focused area plans and programs addressing issues such as infill housing, energy conservation, and resource management. Some *Austinplan* participants have continued to work together in negotiating agreements for a Balcones Canyonlands Conservation Plan as a means to balance development and environmental protection issues. Success in carrying out plans for a sustainable community requires continuing participation by all community interest groups. This continuing participation should be an outcome of a sustainable consensus process.

Conclusion

Planning cannot resolve all the issues related to sustainable resource use. Local community action cannot guarantee global sustainability. But planning and action to build consensus can improve local community sustainability. And if sustainability, like politics, is all ultimately local, the actions of each individual community contribute to the long-term health of the nation and the planet. Sustainable consensus, community by community, can help achieve this global goal. CP

Notes

[1] World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987. *Our Common Future*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Page 33.

[2] 1990 urban population. U. S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1993. *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1993*. Washington, D.C.

[3] Even in a community like Austin, changing political and economic conditions can change the capacity for planning. When the local economy turned down in 1986, City budget and staff resources were constrained, affecting the ability to support the massive process already underway.

[4] Jackson County is the county in which Kansas City, Independence, and seventeen other smaller cities and towns are located.

[5] The Executive Committee included the Steering Committee Co-chairs and the chairs of each of the fourteen subject area Task Groups. Later in the process, a second committee was established to resolve inconsistencies among Task Group recommendations. This group, the Integration Committee, included representatives chosen by the Task Groups themselves. It was responsible for the final consensus plan recommended through the *Austinplan* process.

[6] Fisher, Roger and William Ury, 1981. *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*. Penguin Books, New York.

[7] Susskind, Lawrence and Jeffrey Cruikshank, 1987. *Breaking the Impasse: Consensual Approaches to Resolving Public Disputes*. Basic Books, New York.