

Should Sustainability Replace Environmental Protection As the Goal of Environmental Programs?

This article looks at the enormous amount of attention sustainability and related concepts are receiving at all levels of government and ponders whether sustainability should replace the current goals of environmental programs to protect human health and the environment. While the author does not believe such goals should be supplanted by sustainability goals, he believes sustainability initiatives indeed can and should supplement environmental program goals and policies and that tremendous opportunity exists for better coordination and implementation of more sustainable policies, particularly at local levels of government.

231.1921 Introduction *

It is hard to attend an environmental conference today without hearing the term “sustainability.” In fact, the term has pervaded the lexicon of environmental policy and programs. Dozens of organizations promote sustainability and sustainable development. There are organizations dedicated to a sustainable economy, an ecologically sustainable use of natural resources, a sustainable future, sustainable management of forests, a steady state economy, and the list goes on and on.

The rapid spread and adoption of sustainability raises an intriguing question: Should sustainability become the goal of federal, state, and local environmental programs? Should the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency change its name to the U.S. Sustainability Agency? Should the goal of environmental programs be sustainability?

Sustainability brings several powerful and beneficial concepts to environmental protection that should be a significant component of many environmental initiatives. However, this article suggests sustainability should not replace environmental protection as the goal of environmental programs and organizations.

(a) Big Implications for Environmental Protection

The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development defines “sustainable development” as follows:

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Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

The President’s Council on Sustainable Development uses this definition:

Sustainable development is economic growth that will benefit present and future generations without detrimentally affecting the resources or biological systems of the planet. A sustainable United States will have a growing economy that provides equitable opportunities for satisfying livelihoods and a safe, healthy, high quality of life for current and future generations. Our nation will protect its environment, its natural resource base, and the functions and viability of natural systems on which all life depends.

These definitions are similar and contain concepts that have significant implications for environmental protection. For example, both definitions embrace economic development. Sustainability recognizes the need for economic development and promotes economic development as a necessary mechanism for raising living standards and improving the quality of life. Sustainability recognizes that development will take place but also suggests changing the way economic development is accomplished.

Embracing economic growth and development, however, will be difficult for some in the environmental community. Development often brings environmental degradation, loss of open space, and loss of critical habitat. Economic growth historically has been accompanied by increased consumption of energy, water, and other natural resources. It is these consequences of economic growth and development that environmentalists often find objectionable.

Nonetheless, sustainability holds out the prospect to the environmental community that growth and development need not be the cause of environmental degradation. Sustainability also includes the powerful concept that development must take place in a way that is sustainable over the long term. This requires examination of nearly everything, as individuals and as a society. For example, the current pace of consumption of energy, use of water, and development of open space cannot be sustained over the long term. Sustainable practices will require the abandonment of short-term gain in favor of long-term sus-

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tainable products and services. This requires the drastic alteration of how economic activities are planned and implemented. This is where sustainability and environmental protection share similar goals. Many environmental programs are designed to conserve energy and water, reduce discharges of pollutants, protect open space and habitat, and encourage more sustainable lifestyle choices. This is the profound impact buried in the words “sustainable development” and explains why the term has gained so much traction in environmental circles.

Sustainability also has enormous implications for how natural resources are managed. For finite resources, such as oil and gas, sustainability suggests that we not deplete these resources until we have viable and affordable substitutes, such as renewable sources of energy. For renewable resources, such as timber and shellfish, sustainability requires the employment of sound resource management principles that not only ensure the resource indefinitely but also ensure the protection of other flora and fauna on which these resources depend. The term recognizes that the earth will be mined for minerals and that fish, trees, and other natural resources will be harvested to meet today's needs. Yet again, sustainable resource management holds out the prospect that natural resources can be managed in a sustainable way. Sustainable resource management requires us to substantially improve our resource management capabilities and thus presents a great confluence of interest with the environmental community.

However, some members of the environmental community are skeptical of resource management because there has not been proper management of resources for the long term. Members of the environmental community sometimes prefer to protect and preserve natural resources as a better way of ensuring the long-term survival of species. Environmental groups sometimes will reject the idea that resources can be managed properly in a sustainable way and they point out the strong economic incentives to overharvest resources. The depletion of the whale populations and the shellfish in the Chesapeake Bay are good examples.

Although sustainability brings some powerful concepts to environmental protection, it also is important to consider the concepts that have not been a big part of sustainability, at least until now. For example, sustainability has not emphasized programs and policies to protect human health. Protection of human health primarily has been addressed under the traditional federal and state regulatory authorities such

as the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act. However, the focus of sustainable development has been on developing our infrastructure in a way that is sustainable, not on health threats to humans, flora, or fauna. If the federal and state regulatory agencies adopted sustainability as their primary mission, then protection of human health might be de-emphasized in favor of economic development.

Thus, in answering the question first posed by this article, it is not necessary for the federal and state regulatory programs to shift their mission from protection of human health and the environment to sustainability, and EPA does not have to change its name to the U.S. Sustainability Agency. However, even though sustainability should not supplant more traditional environmental programs, the powerful mandates packed into the term have been the driver behind many exciting and relatively recent developments in the environmental field, and local governments are leading the way.

(b) Local Governments and Sustainability

It makes sense that local governments are heavily involved in sustainable development. Sustainable development usually involves “on the ground” projects, and each project is located in a city or county. Local governments usually have exclusive authority over land-use planning and zoning. A few states, such as Hawaii and Oregon, have statewide land-use planning, but usually zoning and land-use decisions are the purview of local governments. Local governments often are the permitting authority for development projects and thus can use this authority to promote sustainable projects. Also, most local governments promote economic development and have incorporated sustainability into economic development goals. Finally, many local government operations lend themselves to sustainable practices and innovations. Local governments often manage solid waste programs and water and sewer utilities, and these operations often are the focus of efforts by local governments to improve sustainability practices. For example, many local governments are leading efforts to increase recycling and reduce water consumption in their communities.

Given their central role in sustainable development, it is no surprise cities and counties are leaders in implementing innovative and far-reaching programs. For example, Boulder County, Colo., recently launched the Boulder County Sustainability Initia-

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tive.¹ The county hired a sustainability coordinator, and in 2005 the Boulder County commissioners adopted two resolutions that affirmed the county's commitment to energy and resource conservation, greenhouse gas emission reductions, pollution prevention, waste reduction, and other sustainable practices. The resolutions instructed the county's staff to develop short- and long-term action plans addressing climate change, energy efficiency, green buildings, renewable energy, solid waste, and transportation.

Since 2005, the county has completed an inventory of greenhouse gases, revised the county's land-use code to encourage sustainable practices, retrofitted county facilities to save energy, committed to achieve Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED)² standards for all new public buildings, begun using biofuels, installed solar photovoltaics, implemented zero-waste policies, and purchased hybrid and fuel-efficient fleet vehicles. The county also is helping residents and businesses improve their energy efficiency and achieve zero waste. Furthermore, the county is nearing completion of a Sustainable Energy Plan and a mandatory residential green building code. Boulder County obviously has embraced sustainability.

San Jose, Calif., is another community that has used sustainability as an underlying principle of management and decisionmaking. Mayor Chuck Reed's "Green Vision" embraces and promotes sustainability by focusing on 10 goals:³

Within 15 years, the City of San Jose in tandem with its residents and businesses will:

1. Create 25,000 clean tech jobs as the World Center of Clean Tech Innovation.
2. Reduce per capita energy use by 50 percent.
3. Receive 100 percent of its electrical power from clean renewable sources.
4. Build or retrofit 50 million square feet of green buildings.
5. Divert 100 percent of the waste from its landfill and convert waste to energy.
6. Recycle or beneficially reuse 100 percent of its wastewater (100 million gallons per day).

¹ More information on the initiative is available on the Web at <http://www.ecocycle.org/ZeroWaste/Boulder%20County%20Zero%20Waste%20Resolution.pdf>.

² More information on the U.S. Green Building Council's LEED program is available on the Web at <http://www.usgbc.org/>.

³ San Jose's Green Vision is available on the Web at <http://www.sanjoseca.gov/mayor/goals/environment/GreenVision/GreenVision.pdf>.

7. Adopt a general plan with measurable standards for sustainable development.

8. Ensure 100 percent of public fleet vehicles run on alternative fuels.

9. Plant 100,000 new trees and replace 100 percent of its streetlights with smart, zero-emission lighting.

10. Create 100 miles of interconnected trails.

Like Boulder County, San Jose has made sustainability a central component of its environmental programs. Portland, Ore., went so far as to merge its solid waste and recycling programs with its energy program into the Office of Sustainable Development. Thus, sustainability now is a key goal, if not the key goal, of Portland's environmental programs.

(c) The Role of State and Federal Governments

Federal agencies and the states are doing much to support sustainable development. For example, EPA has a small but effective office that promotes and supports smart growth. EPA's Office of Water supports green infrastructure and low-impact development, primarily as tools to improve water quality and comply with stormwater permits. The U.S. Forest Service has been at the forefront of green infrastructure by encouraging and supporting local governments to plan and implement green infrastructure projects.

There is a long way to go, however, before federal, state, and local governments are coordinated in their efforts to support sustainable development. Federal and state governments should start by adopting formal and clear policies promoting sustainable development and then back up these policies with resources.

Sustainable development often requires an investment of resources by a local government. These projects compete with other priorities of the city or county. Thus, federal and state governments can support sustainable development through assistance to local governments, especially where the project will have direct environmental benefits, such better water quality, reduced stormwater runoff, or improved air quality. Federal and state regulators also could assist local government efforts to develop sustainable development programs. It takes expertise, new policies (to promote green buildings or energy conservation, for example), resources, and a long-term commitment by a local government to promote sustainable development. Given the direct environmental benefit of sustainable development, federal and state gov-

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ernments should support these local government programs.

(d) Where Will Sustainability Take Us in the Future?

Sustainability is tied to several strong trends in environmental protection, and these trends will have a significant influence on the environmental priorities of local governments. Climate change initiatives are, perhaps, the best example of local government sustainability efforts. More than 600 cities have signed on to Seattle Mayor Greg Nichols' Climate Protection Agreement,⁴ and the number of cities seems to grow larger every day. Each of these cities is developing or has developed an inventory of greenhouse gases as well as strategies to reduce emissions of those gases. Their strategies target automobile exhaust and fossil fuel-fired electric generating units. In addition, however, often their strategies focus on expanding urban forests, transit-oriented development, "green procurement," promoting infill development and green buildings, reducing solid waste, and increasing recycling. Each of these issues relates directly to sustainable development, and the efforts of local government to address climate change now are driving many innovative programs.

Green buildings are another example of a high-priority environmental initiative tied directly to sustainability. Although green building standards vary, a green building often is located at infill sites, usually uses recycled materials for construction, captures and manages stormwater, and makes more efficient use of energy and water. Like climate change, local governments are leading the way on green buildings. Many local governments have adopted ordinances requiring any new or substantial renovation of publicly funded buildings to achieve green building standards. Montgomery County, Md., went so far as to require all new nonresidential buildings greater than 10,000 square feet, whether publicly funded or privately funded, to achieve a minimum of 20 points under the LEED green building standard.

⁴ The agreement is available on the Web at <http://www.seattle.gov/mayor/climate/>.

Perhaps the most promising benefit from the broad adoption of sustainability, especially at the local level, is the prospect of better coordination between local planning agencies and local environmental departments. Traditionally, the planners and environmental programs have pursued different agendas with different goals. Many planning departments traditionally have promoted economic growth and development goals that often conflict with environmental goals and policies. However, the initiatives that fall under the broad umbrella of sustainability will require planners and environmental programs to work closely. For example, any strategy to reduce greenhouse gases will involve reducing automobile traffic, promoting transit-oriented development, expanding open space, and promoting green buildings. These cannot be accomplished unless the planners work closely and cooperatively with local environmental programs. Ideally, a community's comprehensive plan will link sustainability with environmental protection. Any real and lasting solution to the most pressing problems will require environmental professionals and planners to develop innovative solutions. This is the real promise of the newfound interest in sustainability.

(e) Conclusion

Sustainable development has significant implications for environmental protection, but regulatory agencies should not abandon their long-held focus on protection of human health and the environment. Nonetheless, sustainability has the potential to substantially change how we grow, develop, and create jobs and opportunities while also promoting environmental stewardship. Local governments are uniquely positioned to promote sustainable development and are, in fact, leading the way. You can expect to see more innovation and leadership from cities and counties, but most local governments face significant resource constraints. Federal and state agencies can do much more to promote sustainability, and ideally there eventually will be a coordinated effort among all levels of government promoting sustainable development.

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