

SOCIAL EQUITY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT RULES FOR BUILDING BETTER COMMUNITIES¹

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One of the three interlocking circles of sustainable development is labeled social equity (or sometimes social opportunity or advancement). The three-circle concept recognizes that reconciling economic development with sustainable environmental qualities is not enough; the social needs of the human inhabitants of the land must also be part of the equation. For many Americans, that translates into quality-of-life factors—comfort, security, privacy, and access to common facilities for education and recreation. For many other Americans, however, their principal social concern is equity—equal access to opportunities for jobs, incomes, and education as well as to the benefits of livable communities.

This is not a new issue, of course. Improving the lot of society's poor and disadvantaged has been a continuing political and social goal. But in the context of shaping our communities to achieve sustainable development, the concern for social equity raises practical questions: How? When? Where? And to what extent should people engaged

in developing communities assume some responsibility for answering these questions?

Some years ago, concern for environmental justice sounded a warning about ensuring social equity in the process of achieving sustainable development. As more and more people became aware of the extent of unsafe and unwelcome environmental problems, many residents of lower-income neighborhoods and communities realized that they were residing amid those problems. They looked with heightened concern at the proximity of their homes to solid waste disposal or transfer sites, to industries spewing out malodorous and even toxic emissions as well as noise and glare, to contaminated industrial sites, and to polluted streams and ponds. They also noted the number of times that their neighborhoods were chosen as the site for jails, halfway houses, and other necessary but less-than-desirable land uses.

Some of these conditions resulted from economics-driven decisions that define good sites as cheap sites, especially for

facilities such as landfills that require large expanses of land. Not by coincidence, of course, many low-income neighborhoods develop in less desirable areas where inexpensive housing can be built on inexpensive land. Historically, working-class homes sprang up within walking distance of the factories, railroad yards, and warehouses where residents were employed. Historically, too, these neighborhoods have housed minority populations that have little political clout to influence the location of locally undesirable uses. As metropolitan areas expanded their reach, many older and poorer neighborhoods have found themselves stuck with the detritus of declining core cities as burgeoning suburbs furiously fend off new locations or relocations of undesirable uses.

The rising clamor over the inequities of these conditions resulted in President Clinton's signing Executive Order No. 12898 on February 11, 1994. The order directs each federal agency to "make achieving environmental justice part of its mission by identifying and addressing, as appropriate, disproportional

tionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of its programs, policies and activities on minority populations and low-income populations in the United States. . . .² Federal agencies were enjoined to provide all populations with, first, the opportunity to comment before decisions are made on government programs and activities affecting human health or the environment and, second, the opportunity to share in the benefits of such programs.

The executive order is important because many of the environmental ills visited on our society can be addressed by existing statutes and regulations. Federal and state environmental laws, for instance, restrict noxious emissions and hazardous wastes associated with manufacturing, power production, and automobile use as well as other impacts on air and water quality. A famous controversy in Louisiana, for example, involved the governor's fervent desire to lure a Japanese polyvinyl chloride plant to St. James Parish, a heavily industrialized area near New Orleans. The area's surrounding residents, mostly black, fought the idea of another potentially polluting industry locating near them, especially because it would offer them few jobs. Eventually, the Japanese company pulled out of the conflict and moved to a different site, proposing a smaller plant and committing to restricted emissions. Clearly, residents' fears of potential pollution could have been allayed by evidence that the industry would meet official environmental standards, but Louisiana's record on that score was not sufficiently reassuring.

The Louisiana example, particularly as it affected a minority population, makes it clear that the cause of social equity is broader than the restrictive definition of environmental justice. It calls for treating all members of the community as equal partners with

equal access to job opportunities, healthy and safe living and working conditions, an array of choices for housing, and transportation, and, not least, a long-lacking and renewing natural environment. Social equity in towns, cities, and metropolitan regions means creating and maintaining opportunities and choices for quality of life in its widest sense.

When we examine the communities under development today, we see that we have much yet to accomplish in achieving social equity in sustainable development. The discussion below probes the nature of existing circumstances, defines directions of socially responsible development, and lays out some new rules. Most drum beating for sustainable development focuses on sustaining the natural environment, with only a nod to the fundamental social concerns intrinsically wrapped up with environmentally responsible development of our communities. This discussion attempts, perhaps somewhat crudely, to direct more attention to the realities of social equity as an essential part of sustainable communities.

Where We Are

Today, the nation is engaged in a great internal debate, one of the most significant since the civil rights movement of the 1960s. And like that movement, the current debate will shape the future course of the nation. It concerns *how* we will grow, not *whether* we can grow, and is indicative of the curious point that the nation has arrived at in its growth cycle. Since the days of the Pilgrims, settling this vast nation has been a central concern of our society and economy. At the beginning of the 21st century, however, the question is not how to continue the settlement process but *where* settles and *where*. As with most of the developed world, the United States has reached virtually zero population growth, but we continue to grow through immigration.

Therein lies the rub. When the nation's growth was largely attributable to a Caucasian population, metropolitan growth patterns seemed to be of relatively minor importance. However, as the nation's population becomes less and less Caucasian and more and more nonwhite—by some estimates, so-called minority groups will be the majority by 2050—much of the Caucasian base population is pursuing an exit strategy. Millions of Americans are abandoning central cities, leaving them to the rising tide of foreign-born non-Caucasians and native-born blacks. Although "white flight" is hardly a new phenomenon, it has reached astounding proportions in recent decades. Our nation's separate geography has led to, among other things, over 9 million Americans living in secluded, gate-guarded subdivisions and neighborhoods. It also threatens the very economic and social structure of our society and, with that, our ability to sustain basic environmental qualities.

As noted in chapter 2, the decade of the 1990s witnessed dramatic growth in the ecological footprint of America's metropolises relative to population increases. To cite an example, Seattle's metropolitan population grew at a remarkable 38 percent while the region's urbanized area grew by a whopping 87 percent. Fewer people are covering more land. Clearly, this trend cannot persist. At its root, it is environmentally flawed and, relevant to this discussion, socially irresponsible. Our nation is growing apart, not together.

Where We Must Go

The nation's growth over the past few decades has yielded a legacy of choking smog and a deteriorating quality of life. We are absent from home more and more as we motor longer distances to work. We are less engaged in our communities as more and more of our time is focused on earning money to sustain

costly homes that house fewer people and see less and less use as a sanctuary for family and friends. We will not be able to deal with this dilemma effectively unless we face several important truths. First, our nation is increasingly polarized in terms of race, income, and spatial location. Native Caucasians tend to live in neighborhoods of similar-income families. If African Americans sought to live in neighborhoods in the same manner as whites, nearly 70 percent would have to move. Similarly, over half of Latinos would have to move, although less than 30 percent of Asians would need to do so. Despite some gains in integrating our society, our neighborhoods continue to represent separate societies, creating a tinder box of racial animosity and discontent. As Vietoriz and others suggest, "When areas of the region are divided into rich and poor, low-income communities are at a disadvantage in paying for services. . . . [Thus] physical and social conditions in the core of the city deteriorate . . . , reducing attractiveness, . . . which in turn pushes those who are capable of paying out. . . ."³

Second, we must build our way out of this situation as we have built our way into it. We can start by recognizing that building high-quality, socially equitable communities is the key to salvation. We need to pursue a smarter and better strategy for community development. If not, the resulting social and environmental disaster will threaten the quality of life of future generations. The threat is real. Economic and spatial inequality is crippling America's competitiveness in the global marketplace. For example, the nation's 284 sprawling metropolitan areas require three times the level of expenditure for transportation as that required by smaller and denser European settlements. Transportation in the United States consumes almost 20 percent of the nation's GDP compared with only 9 percent in Japan. If we spent less on travel, we would have more money for education

and social spending that would improve the nation's competitive position in global trade. As the Asian nations expand trade, they add significant internal urban structures to accommodate growth; as for U.S. cities, they continue to sprawl and create a situation that, according to economists Sklar and Hook, "should be a matter of economic policy concern [because] no other industrialized nation has [such] decentralized employment and allowed cities to deteriorate to the same degree as the United States."⁴

In large measure, houses have fueled the remarkable expansion of the nation's metropolitan areas. Probably no single tax measure in U.S. history has had as profound an impact on development patterns as the mortgage interest deduction for home purchases. This tax break has helped support the largest middle class in the world. As a result, future decisions on how and where we house our growing population are inextricably linked to how and where our cities will grow. Therefore, the third truth is that the course to the future is a retreat to our past. We must somehow find a way to provide a safe and decent inventory of housing that is adequate to house coming generations while reversing the outward movement of housing investment. We must maintain what has been built and stop building more housing

for the few and none for the many. We must build homes rather than houses, neighborhoods rather than subdivisions scattered across the countryside, communities that house people near their work and near shopping and services. We must build communities that embrace diversity rather than exclusiveness. Communities that cannot house their own police and fire forces, teachers and secretaries, busboys and trash collectors are incomplete. They shunt the burden of affordable housing to other communities and reap the benefits of hidden subsidies that support their privilege.

What We Must Do

As the nation ages, the options for housing a growing population will undergo a remarkable transformation. Over the next decades, a substantial proportion of the young population cohort will consist primarily of under-educated minorities with skills suitable only for lower-paying jobs. They will not be able to afford single-family houses on half- to one-acre lots in distant suburbs. What housing will be affordable to such people? What about the millions of far-flung, large-lot homes produced today? We must plan now to produce affordable housing in places close to jobs and existing infra-

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Creating a Livable Neighborhood in Baltimore

The Terrace development in Baltimore, pictured in chapter 2, includes both physical elements and socioeconomic programs to address neighborhood needs, including

- a mix of for-sale and rental townhomes of similar appearance;
- inclusion of a business center, retail shop, and community recreation and day-care center;
- recruitment and training of community residents in the construction trades; and
- the new Lexington Terrace Joint Venture, which has organized and manages a community support program, including case assessment and referral services, vocational training, educational services, career counseling and placement, employee assistance programs, daycare services, primary health care services, family support services, recreation and after-school programs, public safety and beautification programs, and housing management programs.

structure systems. We need to find ways to rebuild suburbs to give them a functional future.

More specifically, the first steps in crafting a housing strategy must address dysfunctional practices such as the following:⁵

- large areas zoned for low-density, single-family homes, in part to screen out low-income families;
 - minimum house-size requirements, including minimum standards for numbers of rooms, for floor area, and for construction materials, all of which practically guarantee inaffordability for a substantial share of home seekers;
 - prohibitions against multifamily or higher-density developments as exercised through zoning standards and "discretionary" permit review procedures;
 - restrictions on mobile or manufactured housing, which is viewed as housing for unwanted people;
 - high impact fees and other contributions to infrastructure that are calculated to discourage low-cost development;
 - building codes that discourage retrofitting and rehabilitation of single-family housing for more efficient use;
 - administrative burdens in obtaining project approvals;
 - overly restrictive covenants that discourage affordable housing; and
 - gated communities that erect walls to social interaction.⁶
- The types of design and regulatory tactics identified above are the product of a paranoia over land use. Community

residents and their leaders often believe that their community will become a dumping ground for undesirable people and housing. The only way to reverse current beliefs is to devise regional strategies that allocate resources equitably and generate revenues in ways that serve the housing needs of the entire population, not just the middle- to upper-income classes.

Rules for the New Game

The new intellectual and social paradigm for community development requires a set of principles to guide future actions. The ten principles briefly outlined below provide a starting point—admittedly a debatable one—for a way to a better future, one house at a time.

1. Grow from outside in. The national interest in growth issues seems to focus almost entirely on the most desirable form of new suburban building. But the suburbs is not where much of the action should be targeted; instead, it should be directed to "regrowing" existing cities and first-generation suburbs. Using urban structures already in place

is less costly and more efficient in the short and long runs than just building better suburbs. Millions of acres of core-city and inner-suburban land are lying idle as a result of social problems, economic disincentives, soil contamination, and the like. The first order of business should be to develop new solutions for city ills before investing still further in creating suburban drains for city vitality. Governments today spend more money on upgrading suburban highways than on the cleanup and redevelopment of existing built environments.

The difficult problems of securing safe and attractive areas for rebuilding in cities are not insurmountable. Private developers in Chicago, New York, and San Francisco have helped create livable communities by constructing afford-

able, high-quality housing in inner-city developments. Civic will and state and national government support can help make it happen. One strategy calls for expanding tax credits for inner-city housing while removing code and zoning restrictions that limit the range of permissible housing types. Another is wrapping housing within a community development plan that ensures critical improvements in community amenities as new housing is developed. The Playa Vista infill project in Los Angeles (further described in chapter 6) and the conversion of the Presidio in San Francisco are excellent examples of how to plan and build large-scale, multiuse, mixed-housing communities within existing urban settings to achieve sustainable development goals.

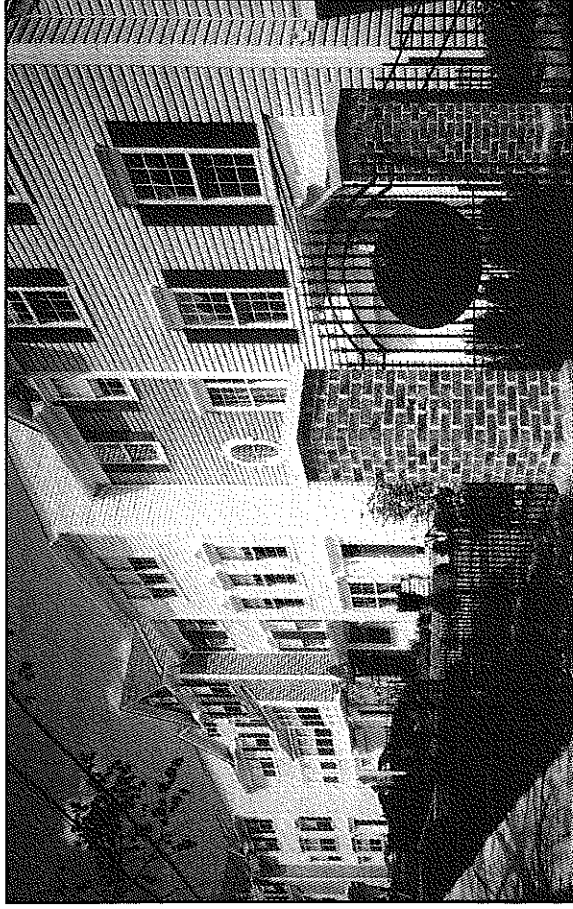
2. Good schools make good neighborhoods. Most people understand that much of the flight to the suburbs is a quest for high-quality, safe schools. (Recent events around the nation, however, demonstrate that suburban schools are not immune from problems that seem to travel with the population.) One key to "regrowing" cities is improv-

ing older schools in both core cities and older suburbs. Money to upgrade the physical condition of schools is essential, but even more important is improving teachers, book collections, equipment, and, most of all, community expectations for schools. Chicago, Newark, and other cities offer models for success that focus on smaller schools, not just smaller classes. Federal matching funds could help promote the reuse of underused land for smaller schools as well as fund the cleanup of contaminated sites and incorporation of schools into infill and redevelopment projects. State codes should be evaluated to allow more private sector school construction and delivery of education.

However, rebuilding rundown neighborhoods may require more than good design and construction. The Anacostia

community in Washington, D.C., once an isolated, dangerous, and dilapidated area, is being revived through the efforts of both for-profit and nonprofit developers who are organizing volunteer and public agency support to re-create a livable community. The William C. Smith Company, for example, has restored 900 rental apartments and is building 210 for-sale townhomes on a 54-acre site previously occupied by 1,400 rundown apartments, 60 percent of them vacant and boarded up. Aided by District of Columbia housing finance programs that make home prices affordable to local residents, and by equity funding from Fannie Mae's American Communities Fund, the townhomes are selling briskly. Even before beginning construction, however, the company fashioned a comprehensive, imaginative program to reestablish the residential values of the neighborhood. First, company staff worked with residents and police to make the area safe, including evicting tenants engaged in illegal activities or who refused to obey resident rules. The developer worked with local school officials and invested over \$300,000 in the physical improvement of two local schools. Subsequently, the developer "adopted" five more schools and the local library; for the latter building, the company organized volunteer and staff efforts to relandscape the grounds, paint the building, and enlarge the book collection. Perhaps most impressive was the company's \$1 million investment in a Splash Park water-recreation facility for local residents. Now the developer is leading efforts to fund a nonprofit cultural and recreational community center.

3. Regional planning as the backbone for supporting growth. The current crazy quilt of jurisdictions that govern the delivery of urban services is too fragmented to provide a coherent approach to housing or economic development at either the regional or local scale. A fresh



The Townhomes of Oxon Creek, Washington, D.C. With nicely articulated home design, and a vigorous, developer-led campaign to improve schools, recreation facilities, and the local library, the for-sale townhomes are attracting first-time homebuyers back to the Anacostia neighborhood, once a crime-ridden backwater of the District of Columbia.

approach is required to create a regional template for the development process. Regional planning efforts (not regional government, which is virtually unknown in the United States) should allocate commercial, residential, and industrial development within a framework of environmental constraints. Building construction should be promoted where it is needed, not where it is easiest to accomplish.

4. A regional tax structure encouraging "best use." Tax policies steer development. Current forms of taxation based on sales taxes and user fees as well as on property taxes promote forms of development that may meet fiscal criteria but are deficient in creating communities, including most forms of housing. Moreover, taxes on existing properties often treat land as a secondary value, reducing incentives for transfer to higher and better uses. Frequently, for example, a landlord finds it less costly to leave a building vacant than to rent it at rates lower than its presumed "market" rent.

Land should be taxed on the basis of its potential use rather than on its current nonuse or poor use, thus driving more rational uses of land for housing and other purposes.

In addition, states should collect and reallocate sales and similar taxes according to population and job growth rather than according to the point-of-sales mechanism so often employed. Such a policy would help correct the fiscal imbalances and irrational land use patterns caused by competition between jurisdictions for sales tax-generating commercial development. Taxation on land use potential coupled with state-level tax collection and reallocation would begin to make regional development work in favor of better housing for more people.

5. Housing development integrated with overall community development. Few communities have developed housing plans that indicate how different housing types could be designed and

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interrelated to form livable neighborhood. Instead, most local officials wait to react to developers' proposals, frequently losing opportunities to link residential development with other housing areas as well as with commercial services and employment areas. What occurs too often is widespread development of certain housing types that age poorly and increasingly fail to serve changing housing needs.

6. **Open space as essential green infrastructure in urban development.** With few exceptions, the cities we build today lack well-designed open spaces and open-space systems. The deliberate hierarchy of parks and open space linked together throughout London is a major factor in that city's success as an urban living environment. By contrast, most American cities lack comprehensive approaches to providing open space as part of the urban fabric. Cities and suburbs need new breathing spaces that are accessible and functional and that open up developed areas to systems of preserved open spaces that reach throughout a region. In some cases, cities will have to refocus their attention on creating open spaces in already built-up areas. In other cases, cities and suburbs should plan to acquire and require, through the development process, open space for human needs. Open space—green infrastructure—should be considered just as important as any other system of infrastructure in supporting livable communities.

7. **Streets that work for people and transit as well as for cars.** As our suburban development patterns have shifted from serving people to serving auto-

mobiles, we have lost the ability to substitute walking, cycling, and transit for automobile dependence. The magic of the new urbanism's grid street system is that it is more welcoming to nonautomobile forms of travel. Although a strict grid is not an absolute requirement, our travel systems should incorporate sidewalks as a matter of course. They should provide for a network of streets that allow for several choices of access. They should accommodate bus transit through neighborhoods as well as convenient access to nearby rail stations. Such travel systems need not and should not require wide streets but rather more streets, more pathways to important destinations, and narrower and more pleasant streets that act as foci for community interaction.

8. **Good-looking, intergenerational buildings.** Well-designed buildings last for centuries. As distinctive contributions to livable communities, they are treasured, maintained, restored, and reused for several purposes over time. In too many communities, developers' proposals are treated as potentially interim uses that are expected to be replaced with something else after they wear out. Every community should proclaim design principles that build architectural value into homes and commercial structures. The principles should respect community styles—historic and otherwise—and preferences without stifling creativity. Good buildings make livable, sustainable communities.

9. **Jobs as well as houses.** Creating good jobs is as important for every community as saving the environment. Without a sound economic base, com-

munities cannot expect to sustain sensitive environment or maintain neighborhood livability. As communities address the imbalance between jobs and housing and generate adequate-income jobs for all citizens, crime and other social pathologies will decline.

10. **Interjurisdictional collaboration to protect the environment.** The environment—sensitive lands and features and water, land, and air quality—should not become a battleground over who saves what. Clearly, these features and qualities are protectable only when communities and their leaders adopt a regional or watershed view of the long-term value of natural resources in relation to needed development. With a regional outlook, citizens and policy makers can define and fashion approaches to protect environmental resources. However, a regional outlook requires collaboration between cities and counties and between public agencies and private sector interests. The results of that collaboration can guide the land use actions needed to ensure a sustainable future.

Conclusion

Adequate, affordable housing and livable neighborhoods are essential elements of sustainable growth. If we do not learn how to develop housing that reflects the hopes and aspirations of all Americans, we will continue our downward spiral toward an unequal and divided society. To house an increasingly diverse citizenry and to restore and sustain our communities, we need a new set of rules to guide development at both the regional and local levels.

Endnotes

- 1 This chapter was adapted from a presentation by Professor Edward J. Blakely at the conference, "Housing in the 21st Century," sponsored by the Urban Land Institute on March 29, 2000, in Washington, DC.
- 2 Executive Order No. 12898, signed by President Bill Clinton, February 11, 1994.
- 3 Thomas Vietorisz, William Goldsmith, and Joseph Grengs, "Air Quality, Urban Form and Coordinated Urban Policies," Working Paper No. 176, Cornell University Department of City and Regional Planning, June 1998.
- 4 Elliott Sklar and Walter Hook, "The Importance of Cities to the National Economy," *Intervoven Destinies: Cities and the Nation*. Henry Cisneros, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993).
- 5 This list was adapted from Vietorisz, Goldsmith, and Grengs, Working Paper No. 176.
- 6 For more discussion on this subject, see Edward J. Blakely and Mary G. Snyder, *Fortress America* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1997.)