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Civic Engagement and Sustainable Cities in the United States

Over the last decade, at least 42 U.S. cities have elected to pursue sustainable cities programs to improve their livability. Some programs are broad, involving smart growth efforts, and others are narrowly targeted, including bicycle ridership and pesticide-reduction programs. A recurring theme in these cities is the role of public participation in shaping and implementing these programs. In cities where the sustainable cities idea first emerged in local grassroots organizations, such as Seattle, these programs owe their existence to public involvement. Other cities have taken a top-down approach, treating sustainability as a matter for experts rather than ordinary citizens. Civic engagement is manifest both in the development of the sustainability program and as an explicit goal of the sustainability program. This article examines the role of civic engagement in these programs and defines a research agenda by identifying hypotheses about the importance of public involvement in sustainable cities programs.

Over the last 10 to 15 years, the landscape of American environmentalism has shifted substantially from national and state policies to efforts designed to shape the contours of the biophysical environment in smaller geographic areas. Prominent among these efforts are what have become known as *sustainable communities* and *sustainable cities* initiatives. Until recently, the idea that small geographic areas are appropriate or effective places in which to pursue the protection and improvement of the environment was rather foreign. Indeed, perhaps the predominant reason environmental attention shifted to the national level beginning in the 1960s and 1970s was because it was thought that (1) most environmental problems are too big and expansive to be tackled at a local level,[1] and (2) local governments are politically and economically the most ill-suited levels of government in which to find a friendly home. Environmental advocacy groups could never achieve anything approaching a critical mass of members at any local level to effectuate policy change, and local politics and policy tended to be dominated by, or at least primarily responsive to, local business interests, which have always had a distinct allergy to environmental protection as a matter of public policy (Berry 1999; Molotch 1976; Shaiko 1999).

This began to change during the late 1980s and early 1990s, partly because of the recognition in the international world that local governments and places have a significant role to play in environmental protection and because of the increasingly resistant national political regimes in the United States. The shift seems to have accelerated in recent years, perhaps as a result of the decline of locally owned manufacturing industries that once represented the economic backbone of nearly every major city in the United States. Today, with the decline of manufacturing industries nationwide, cities apparently feel much more secure pursuing environmental protection than they once did. Where city leaders might once have been convinced that the pursuit of environmental protection would threaten the local manufacturing job base, they now feel no such threat, paradoxically, because the manufacturing job base is essentially gone. In any case, cities from Boston to Chicago to Seattle to Scottsdale to Austin to Jacksonville to Chattanooga—and scores of places in between—have begun to take the idea of sustainability seriously (Portney 2003).

This article is principally about how U.S. cities' efforts have dealt with the issue of public participation and en-

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gagement in the context of their sustainability programs. It briefly reviews some of the relevant literature on why relatively high levels of public participation are thought to be desirable, why public engagement is expected to contribute to the achievement of sustainability at the local level, and how public participation in sustainable cities efforts has been manifest. Most cities that have developed sustainability programs have done so with some form of public participation process, and this article will review the kinds of processes that have been used. Moreover, the sustainability programs themselves often call for expanded civic engagement as part of the definition of what it means to be a more sustainable city. This article reviews the conceptual reasons why expanded civic engagement might be considered an integral part of a sustainable cities effort and documents how the call for greater engagement is reflected in the context of cities' sustainability programs.

The Idea of Sustainable Cities

Before embarking on an effort to examine the civic engagement side of sustainable cities, it is perhaps appropriate to provide a brief overview of what sustainable cities are and what sustainability means in the context of relatively small geographic areas. The concepts of sustainable cities and sustainable communities have their genetic roots in the general concept of sustainability and its close cousin, sustainable economic development, and in particular conceptions of what constitutes a community. Ever since the term "sustainable communities" was first brought into the lexicon of environmentalism, scholars and practitioners have seized on it to promote and facilitate various kinds of proenvironmental change. Although the term obviously seems to convey great meaning to a wide array of people, it has come to mean so many different things to so many different people that it probably does as much to promote confusion and cynicism as positive environmental change. When the concept of sustainability is coupled with the idea of community—which is itself an abstract and, some would say, almost meaningless concept—finding meaning in the idea of sustainable communities seems hopeless.

As a matter of practice, the idea of sustainable communities has evolved in such a way as to provide greater meaning than initially appears. The concept of sustainable communities was originally derived in an attempt to account for a large number and variety of environmental and interpersonal impacts of economic growth that are not comfortably accommodated by neoclassical economic theory or practice. Sustainable communities have been thought of as mechanisms that can be used to redress the often negative or deleterious environmental and social effects of adherence to mainstream approaches to economic development. In contemporary applications of the concept of sustainable communities, there is variation in how local sustainability is defined, and sometimes elements that are central to some conceptions are omitted, overlooked, or substantially modified.

Sustainability and sustainable development are perhaps best thought of as general concepts whose precise definitions have yet to be fully explicated. Many notions of sustainability share a deep concern for the quality of the biophysical environment. Charles Kidd (1992), for example, argues there are at least six different historical intellectual strains of thought that underlie the contemporary concept of sustainability, each with its own slant or articulation of particularly important foundational issues. He discusses the ecological/carrying capacity root, the natural resource/environment root, the biosphere root, the critique-of-technology root, and the ecodevelopment root. Becky J. Brown and colleagues suggest that in contemporary usage, the term "sustainability" has some six different definitions that relate to "sustainable biological resource use," "sustainable agriculture," "carrying capacity," "sustainable energy," "sustainable society and economy," and "sustainable development" (1987, 713–19).

Other definitions focus on what might be called *cross-generation* concerns and the idea that economic development needs to be viewed over a longer period of time than is usually practiced. This concept of sustainability achieved elevated recognition and legitimacy during the late 1980s after the United Nations' World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), also commonly known as the Brundtland Commission, issued its report *Our Common Future* in 1987. This report was designed to create an international agenda focusing on how to protect the global environment or, as stated in the report, to sustain and expand the environmental resource base of the world. In the process, it put forth the very general notion that sustainable development consists of economic development activity that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED 1987, 8). Capturing this cross-generation concern in the U.S. context, the National Commission on the Environment (NCE) put forth a similar set of conceptual definitions. The 1993 report of this commission suggested the need for the United States to pursue a "strategy for improving the quality of life while preserving the environmental potential for the future, of living off interest rather than consuming natural capital" (NCE 1993, 2).

In the context of the global concern for the sustainable development of nations, in which the notion of sustainable local communities may seem incongruous, the idea of sustainable communities is born out of an understanding of the importance of individual human behavior and the local governance context in which that behavior takes place. The

Brundtland Commission report served as the foundation for the discussions and negotiations on sustainable development that took place among nations at the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. One of the results of the Earth Summit was the passage of a resolution often referred to as Agenda 21, a statement of the basic principles that should guide nations in their quest for economic development in the twenty-first century. As part of the Agenda 21 resolution, significant attention was given to the relationship between national policies and the activities of local governments. As Agenda 21 states,

> Because so many of the problems and solutions being addressed by Agenda 21 have their roots in local activities, the participation and cooperation of local authorities will be a determining factor in fulfilling its objectives. Local authorities construct, operate and maintain economic, social, and environmental infrastructure, oversee planning processes, establish local environmental policies and regulations, and assist in implementing national and subnational environmental policies. As the level of governance closest to the people, they play a vital role in educating, mobilizing, and responding to the public to promote sustainable development. (UNEP 2000)

Although the idea of sustainable communities is grounded in the need to address environmental and livability issues as they affect individual people, it also has grown out of particular understandings of community. "Community" has come to mean everything from neighborhoods to voluntary organizations, professional associations, civic groups, online internet chat rooms, and more. In the context of sustainability, the idea of community carries many different meanings but typically corresponds to relatively small geographic areas. When the Clinton administration's National Science and Technology Council (NSTC) presented its 1995 National Environmental Technology Strategy, *Bridge to a Sustainable Future*, great emphasis was placed on the role of community in achieving greater sustainability. Without ever really defining what a community is, the report states,

> Our nation's future strength will in large part be built on the viability of our nation's communities. We must make choices today that increase the sustainability and desirability of our cities, towns, and rural areas if we are to preserve our natural environment and build a strong domestic economy.… The largest and most complex class of environmental technologies are those supporting our communities: technologies that transport people or goods, produce and deliver energy, treat water supplies and waste products, provide food, and route and process information. To achieve sustainability, technological solutions must be integrated with the unique economic, social, political, and cultural circumstances of each community. (NSTC 1995, 52, 69–70)

Clearly, the implied meaning of sustainable community in this report relates to small geographic areas where various new sustainable technologies can be effectively integrated with economic, political, and cultural practices that vary from place to place.

In 1999, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency issued its Framework for Community-Based Environmental Protection (CBEP), its version of sustainable communities, which carried a somewhat more explicit statement of what community means. This document emphasized a functional but flexible definition:

> Intrinsic to CBEP is an understanding of "community." The definition of community endorsed by EPA for CBEP efforts includes places that are associated with an environmental issue(s). The community may be organized around a neighborhood, a town, a city, or a region (such as a watershed, valley, or coastal area). It may be defined by either natural geographic or political boundaries. The key factor is that the people involved have a common interest in protecting an identifiable, shared environment and quality of life. (EPA 1999, 5)

What Do Sustainable Cities Programs Look Like?

Before addressing the central issue of the link between sustainable cities and civic engagement, it might be useful to briefly review what cities that claim to or seem to be pursuing sustainability are actually doing. In the U.S. context, cities such as Seattle, Washington; Portland, Oregon; San Francisco, San Jose, Santa Monica, Santa Barbara, Los Angeles, and Sacramento, California; Chicago, Illinois; Austin, Texas; Chattanooga, Tennessee; Denver and Boulder, Colorado; Jacksonville, Florida; Scottsdale, Arizona; and many others have begun governmental or nonprofit programs to work toward achieving important sustainability results. A reasonably comprehensive list of cities that have developed some sort of sustainability initiative is found in table 1.

Most of these programs or initiatives represent fairly comprehensive efforts to improve and protect their cities' environments. Some of the programs are citywide initiatives to address a particular environmental problem. Sometimes they are focused on a particular economic sector or activity, such as household recycling or brownfields development, and sometimes they cut across sectors and activities. Sometimes they operate out of single government agencies (an environmental department, department of public works, or planning department), sometimes they

Table 1 Cities with Sustainability Programs, January 1, 2005

City	Program
Chattanooga, TN	Sustainable Chattanooga
Jacksonville, FL	Jacksonville Indicators Project, Jacksonville Community Council
Orlando, FL	Sustainable Communities Program
Tampa, FL	Tampa/Hillsborough County Sustainable Communities Demonstration Project
Seattle, WA	Sustainable Seattle/ Comprehensive Plan
Olympia, WA	Sustainable City Indicators/Sustainable Community Roundtable
Portland, OR	Comprehensive Plan
Milwaukee, WI	Campaign for Sustainable Milwaukee
Santa Monica, CA	Santa Monica Sustainable City Program
San Francisco, CA	Sustainability Plan
San Jose, CA	Sustainable City Program (Sustainable City Major Strategy—San Jose 2020)
Santa Barbara, CA	South Coast Community Indicators Project
Austin, TX	Sustainable Communities Initiative and Sustainability Indicators Project of Hayes, Travis, and Williamson Counties
Indianapolis, IN	IndyEcology
Boulder, CO	Sustainability Program
Cambridge, MA	Sustainable Cambridge, Cambridge Civic Forum
Boston, MA	Sustainable Boston Initiative
Brookline, MA	Comprehensive Plan
Scottsdale, AZ	Scottsdale Seeks Sustainability
Phoenix, AZ	Comprehensive Plan, Environmental Element
Tucson, AZ	Livable Tucson Vision Program
Cleveland, OH	Sustainable Cleveland Partnership, EcoCity Cleveland
Cincinnati, OH	Sustainable Cincinnati
New Haven, CT	Vision for a Greater New Haven
Albuquerque, NM	Comprehensive Plan, Sustainable Albuquerque Progress Report, Green Alliance, Albuquerque's Environmental Story
Anchorage, AK	Anchorage 2020 Comprehensive Plan; Healthy Anchorage Indicators Project
Atlanta, GA	Comprehensive Development Plan
Baltimore, MD	Plan Baltimore
Buffalo, NY	Comprehensive Plan; Green Gold Initiative
Chicago. IL	Chicago Area Central Plan
Denver, CO	Denver Comprehensive Plan 2000
Kansas City, MO	Metro Kansas City Outlook; Environmental Management System
Lansing/E. Lansing, MI	Urban Options—Sustainable Lansing
Grand Rapids, MI	Plan Grand Rapids
Los Angeles, CA	General Plan
Minneapolis, MN	Sustainability Plan
New York, NY	Consolidated Plan 2002; Social and Environmental Indicators Project
Pittsburgh, PA	Sustainable Pittsburgh
Sacramento, CA	Sacramento General Plan
San Diego, CA	Sustainable Communities Program; City of Villages General Plan
St. Louis, MO	Sustainable Neighborhood Program
Washington, DC	Comprehensive Plan; Sustainable Washington Alliance

integrate a variety of governmental activities, and sometimes they operate completely independent of government departments (such as a local nonprofit organization). In any case, sustainable communities initiatives have emerged and exist in cities all around the country. What these initiatives do—how they define and attempt to achieve their objectives—has been documented elsewhere (Portney 2003). This research focused on 34 specific municipal policies and programs, summarized in table 2. Not all cities have adopted all of these policies or programs; indeed, some do much more than others.[2]

Much of the analysis that follows is based on information on a small subset of the 42 or so cities in the United States that have sustainability programs. The central focus is a handful of cities that seem to have established themselves as innovators in their efforts to connect their concern for sustainability to civic engagement. These cities—Santa Barbara, Jacksonville, Cambridge, and Chattanooga—are among the most frequently cited examples

Table 2 Components of Sustainable Cities Programs*

Does city have a local program or policy including the following elements:

- Ecoindustrial parks
- Cluster economic development
- Ecovillages or infill housing development
- Brownfield redevelopment initiatives
- Environmentally sensitive zones incorporated into zoning code
- Comprehensive sustainability plan
- Tax incentives for environmentally friendly development
- Local (as opposed to just regional) public transit
- Limits on parking spaces
- Carpool lanes on local roadways
- Alternative-fuel vehicles for the city's fleet
- Bike ridership program
- Household solid waste recycling
- Industrial recycling
- Hazardous waste recycling
- Air pollution reduction program
- Purchase recycled materials in city operations
- Superfund remediation initiatives
- Asbestos remediation
- Lead abatement program
- Integrated pest management and pesticide reduction
- Green building program
- Renewable energy in city government operations
- Energy conservation program
- Alternative energy options for residential consumers
- Water conservation program
- Sustainable indicators project active within last five years
- Sustainable indicators progress report issued in last five years
- Sustainable indicators project including action plan
- Sustainable cities program responsibility of a single agency
- Sustainability program part of a citywide sustainability plan
- City council involved in implementation
- Mayor or chief executive involved in implementation
- Business involved in program development or implementation

*For an assessment of programs that have been adopted and implemented in cities, see Portney (2003). The original assessment included a component indicating the presence of a public participation component. For the purposes of this analysis, the public participation component was removed as an explicit element of cities' sustainability programs and treated as a separate variable.

of places that have taken significant sustainability initiatives. These locations are certainly not the only cities whose sustainability programs include significant attention to civic engagement. They do help to establish a sense of the range of variation in approaches and show how some cities make the connection between their conception of sustainability and the inclusion of participatory opportunities.

The Role of Participation and Civic Engagement in Sustainable Cities Efforts

Civic engagement plays two distinct roles in the context of sustainable cities. First, many advocates of local sustainability believe that participatory processes are necessary for a city to produce a durable and operational definition of sustainability. In other words, as the city decides which specific programs and policies need to be enacted or modified to promote sustainability, local residents are instrumental. Second, many advocates of sustainability seem to believe that greater civic engagement is itself an integral part of what it means for a city to be more sustainable and that cities need to adopt policies that will promote civic participation.

From the perspective of civic engagement, sustainable cities efforts are interesting because of the role city residents play in defining what is meant by sustainability and the kinds of policies and programs pursued as a result of this definition. Early adopters of sustainable cities initiatives such as Seattle, Portland, Santa Monica, and Boulder tended to conceptualize their sustainable cities efforts as broad-based participatory processes: They would simultaneously provide a forum for residents to express their views on what it means for their place to be sustainable and a mechanism to gradually raise the collective consciousness of the resident population to understand how consumer attitudes and behavior would need to change to achieve sustainability goals. Stated succinctly, the often unstated assumptions underlying sustainable cities efforts were that (1) a highly participatory process would be needed to convince local elected and agency officials that sustainability should be pursued; (2) any locally defined effort to protect and improve the biophysical environment would be better (more attuned to the needs of the city and more effective when implemented) if that effort were informed by the residents of the city; and (3) the results of any such effort would produce better outcomes (a better biophysical environment) if residents participated in the process.

Particularly with respect to assumptions 2 and 3, there is an expectation that participation will change the participants. Presumably, assumption 1 reflects a particular understanding of how local politics work and a belief that local leaders will simply, at some level, be responsive to residents who articulate a specific set of policy preferences. Assumption 3, however, implies that when people participate in the process of deciding what their sustainable city is (or should be), that process will change them—raise their consciousness about the connection between their own behaviors and the attainment of sustainability—and that this change in consciousness will lead to changed consumer (and perhaps political) behavior. Much like Barber's (1984) advocacy of "strong democracy" as a way of ushering in a changed sense of civic responsibility, sustainable cities advocates wish to usher in a changed public sense of the environment.

The idea that the pursuit of sustainability is inextricably linked to civic engagement is summarized nicely by Shutkin, who writes, "The civic elements in a community—the education system, the rates of poverty and unemployment, the level of political participation—and the physical environment are thus reciprocating conditions … the human forces of production, reproduction, and consciousness within the American liberal-capitalist system shape and reshape the physical environment, while the environment itself influences and constrains those same forces" (2003, 47). Thus, the expectation that there is a link between civic engagement and environmental protection seems wholly realistic. Yet even acknowledging there may be a connection provides little in the way of specific justification for the idea that people who participate in sustainable cities efforts will be changed by the experience.

What is evident from many pragmatic definitions of sustainable communities, particularly those that have emerged from cities' sustainable indicators projects, is that there is often deep concern for the elements of human interaction and relationships. In many cities, the concept of sustainable communities is not just about protecting the environment or controlling economic growth for the benefit of the environment. It is also about the relationship between the physical environment and the people who populate it, including a wide range of social issues that transcend the purely environmental. This view of sustainable cities places great importance on the function of civil society—the institutions and social processes that influence how residents interact (or don't interact) with each other. Thus, in many respects, it is also about how the environment is defined, in the sense that many believe it is desirable to move beyond a conception of the environment in purely biophysical terms to a view that is more expansive and inclusive. But this raises a variety of issues and questions. Given the underlying conceptual underpinnings for sustainability, is there reason to pursue an expanded definition of what constitutes the environment? Is there some expected relationship or causal connection between the biophysical environment and the function of civil society? Does the character of the local civil society in some

way determine or influence whether cities choose to be aggressive in pursuing sustainability? Can cities' sustainability initiatives, in practice, accommodate expanded definitions that incorporate issues of civil society?

A close look at some of the conceptual underpinnings of sustainability yields the unavoidable conclusion that the concept of sustainable communities is, for many cities and in many respects, fundamentally communitarian in nature. The concept of sustainable communities, as it was originally imagined and articulated by some and is practiced in many cities, may be about finding ways to pursue economic growth while explicitly promoting particular kinds of human interactions and shaping civil society. This is based on the notion that explicit attention needs to be paid to the relationship between economic growth and environmental protection, on one hand, and what it takes to make cities livable, on the other hand. To many advocates of sustainable communities, making cities livable requires changing the fabric of civil society. Without changing the way people relate to each other and the values that underlie these interactions, pursuing sustainability simply would not be possible. Although this is an idea that is generally still in search of empirical support, there is little question that in a number of cities, there are clear assumptions about the nature of this relationship. It is also clear that many advocates of sustainability see an explicit connection between the condition of the environment and the operation of civil society, regardless of whether cities' particular sustainability initiatives endorse it.

At the same time, however, it is the communitarian character of sustainable cities that often makes the pursuit of sustainability a very challenging political process. Particularly in cities where the dominant culture is something other than communitarian, sustainability initiatives butt heads with political and civic leaders. Very often, this clash represents the tension between pursuing traditional economic development and following a different, more environmentally friendly path. Many cities' sustainability projects are initiated by people who believe that such projects will unleash a populist, neighborhood-based assault on the dominant political, economic, and social values. Indeed, many local advocates of sustainability see the sustainable indicators project as a vehicle for producing a wide array of social changes. When the dominant social and political values turn out to be far more resistant to change than anticipated and such projects experience little success in getting communitarian issues on the public agenda, interest in them sometimes wanes.

Cities' sustainability initiatives themselves rarely lay out any sort of reason why public participation, empowerment, community building, and other dimensions of civil society are thought to be important elements of their efforts. Even so, there is a clear logic that prescribes why concerns for community might be integral components of any initiative that takes sustainability seriously. Indeed, one of the features that helps to distinguish cities' sustainability efforts centers on the extent to which those efforts actually seek to promote citizen participation and involvement, interpersonal interactions directed at improving the operations of government, and community-based problem solving.

Not all advocates of sustainable communities accept the idea that there must be or ought to be a heavy communitarian element to sustainability initiatives. Indeed, as we will discuss later, even among many advocates of sustainable cities, there is a strong suggestion that pursuit of communitarian goals gets in the way of pursuing environmental goals. This represents yet another side to the challenge of pursuing sustainability in cities. The decidedly communitarian elements of sustainable cities definitions are often at loggerheads with strictly environmental definitions.

Other proponents see the pursuit of sustainability as a highly technical and professional endeavor in which there is no need for large-scale public involvement. In this view, sustainability is, by its nature, an objective goal. To these advocates, there is no question what needs to be accomplished, and there really is no difference of opinion about which environmental problems need to be addressed and how they should be addressed. If a city has an internal air pollution problem, so the argument goes, correcting this problem is a job for professionals (Brugmann 1997). One does not need to build a community or create a communitarian utopia to redress the essential problem. Thus, in the view of many advocates of sustainable cities, priorities are misplaced.

Indeed, the essential problem confronted by communitarian conceptions of sustainable cities is the idea that sustainability can be pursued as a matter of professional expertise. If air pollution is a purely technical problem, then why didn't we correct the problem years ago? If water pollution is a matter for the professionals, then why are our waterways and groundwater supplies still threatened? For many observers, the fundamental reason is public values—the value that political and business leaders and the general public place on individual freedoms and liberties. As long as most people are willing to accept the status quo, little progress toward sustainability is possible. In this argument, the *political will* to pursue sustainability prevents professionals and technical experts from doing their part. The question becomes, how can this political will be stimulated? To communitarians, until the political will to pursue sustainable cities is developed, marginal improvements in sustainability and livability are the best that can be achieved. Skeptics, such as Ophuls and Boyan (1992, 237–53) doubt that even marginal improvements are possible. Communitarians offer the hope that addressing is-

sues of civil society will begin the process of altering community values and make the pursuit of sustainability possible.

The Three Deadly Sins

Why are the communitarian elements considered by some to be important, if not essential, components of sustainable cities? Why do some people believe that community building and participatory processes are (or should be) such an integral part of taking sustainability seriously? The starting point for understanding the communitarian foundations of sustainable communities must be a recognition of the "three deadly sins" that are often thought to impede progress toward sustainability—three generalizable social and governance problems that are thought to lie at the heart of *unsustainability*. These three problems are the tragedy of the commons, the not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) syndrome, and the expansion of cities' ecological footprints that results from transboundary shifting of environmental impacts. Each of these phenomena contributes to the difficulty of making small geographic areas sustainable, in the sense that they represent system-level consequences of individual-level attitudes, values, and behaviors. And it is these three deadly sins that communitarian approaches to sustainability promise to redress.

All three of these problems are fed by what some commentators call "rampant individualism," in which individuals are free to act on what they believe to be their own immediate self-interest. The basic argument concerning these problems is that they are created by a mismatch between what is good for society—or in this case, the community—and what individuals think is good for them personally. Contrary to the basic tenets of neoclassical economics and political liberalism, the communitarian view suggests that what is good for the community in the aggregate is not always the sum of what is good for each individual acting as a rational consumer in that community. In short, the communitarian view of sustainability suggests there is no functioning mechanism in communities today to encourage individuals to consider the community or the aggregate consequences of their imputations of self-interest and the personal behavior that stems from them.

The need for sustainable cities initiatives, from a communitarian perspective, has never been greater. The values and attitudes that support and reinforce unsustainable practices have become stronger, and the mechanisms that support and reinforce shared values and understandings of common issues have become weaker. Witness, for example, the growth of "green backlash" initiatives such as the sagebrush rebellion of the 1980s and the more recent new property rights movement. These represent strong political initiatives aimed at undermining communitarian solutions to environmental protection (Switzer 1997). Underlying the link between the need to build community and the pursuit of sustainability is the notion that, for a variety of reasons, the mechanisms that once could be counted on are disappearing. The local political organizations and organizations of civil society that once kept residents personally engaged, active, and edified have diminished and declined, replaced by large national lobbying organizations that do not typically perform these functions. When Putnam (1995, 2000) argues that we are now "bowling alone," and when the National Commission on Civic Renewal (1998) calls us "a nation of spectators," they are making the argument that the loss of opportunities for people to interact with each other has undermined the creation of shared values and understandings. Applied to sustainable cities, this means that the key problems—the tragedy of the commons, the NIMBY syndrome, and resulting transboundary problems—are getting worse. As the institutions and organizations of civil society have declined, so the argument goes, there is no longer any social or political mechanism to mitigate the rampant individualism that contributes to unsustainability. As we will see, cities that take sustainability seriously seek to redress this issue by creating initiatives that are designed to engage residents and build a shared understanding and vision of the city and its environment.

Just as the idea of sustainable communities grew out of a particular understanding of sustainability, it also grew out of a particular understanding of community—or more specifically, the role of community in contributing to a more sustainable environment. Often, critics of the new localism of environmental policy misunderstand the conceptual importance of community to sustainability, dismiss the importance of community as having no empirical support, or, worse, distrust community as the last bastion of parochialism. But communitarian thought nonetheless provides perhaps the strongest conceptual underpinnings to the idea of sustainable communities. There is no doubt that underlying much of the advocacy of sustainable cities and sustainable communities is the notion that associated participatory processes will become instrumental in transforming cities into environmentally responsible places. Stated in Putnam's terms, the processes associated with creating and maintaining a sustainable city are expected to fill the social capital void left by decades of benign neglect to issues of interpersonal interactions. Advocates of sustainable communities seem to think that promoting such interactions will create the political foundation and support necessary for the pursuit of environmentally responsible local policies.

Much of the contemporary communitarian movement is based largely on the notion that liberalism has fostered the evolution of communities without shared values.

Liberalism's focus on individualism, according to this view, has produced a shift "in our practices and institutions, from a public philosophy of common purposes to one of fair procedures, from a politics of good to a politics of right, from the national republic to the procedural republic" (Sandel 1984, 93). As Barber states, liberalism has created a political system that "can conceive of no form of citizenship other than the self-interested bargain" (1994, 24). The result is that citizens increasingly see the personal gains, particularly the short-run gains, they can accrue from acting as individuals but do not see how the impacts they produce affect others.

Perhaps equally important, the institutions of society—the components of civil society—which conceivably could contribute to the development of shared values and promote broader understandings of individuals' impacts on others, have been all but forgotten in contemporary America. The communitarian movement seeks to reverse this trend by reasserting the importance of shared community values. Thus, when Etzioni writes that "the virtue of *stewardship toward the earth*, the commitment to the environment as a common good, is profoundly communitarian, on the face of it" (1996, 252), he is asserting a connection between communitarian values and sustainability. This connection may seem obvious to some, yet it is precisely this communitarian element that is missing in many applied sustainable communities efforts and is often denigrated as irrelevant or counter to local sustainable *economic* development.

Much of the foundation for the communitarian content of sustainable communities may be embedded in the concept of *civic environmentalism*, which has developed since the early 1990s and represents an effort to offer alternatives—or, more accurately, *complements*—to federal and state command-and-control environmental regulation. The idea, articulated by DeWitt John (1994), is that local communities can do much to improve and protect the environment even when federal and state regulatory agencies are legally or politically constrained from acting. To John, civic environmentalism grew out of frustration with environmentalists during the 1980s, when environmental protection was clearly a low priority in federal policy. As John notes, "in some cases, communities and states will organize on their own to protect the environment even without being forced to do so by the federal government…. Civic environmentalism is fundamentally a bottom-up approach to environmental protection" (1994, 7).

But civic environmentalism has evolved beyond simply prescribing a role for communities in environmental protection to incorporate many communitarian notions of participatory processes. John offered a germ of this idea when in his discussion of the processes that he associates with locally based environmental protection:

> Civic environmentalism … tends to involve a different style of politics than command-and-control regulation. There are still strong differences of opinion [in environmental protection decisions], but there are fewer confrontations between black hat polluters and white hat protectors of the public trust, and there is more bargaining among a diverse set of participants. Civic environmentalism is a more collaborative, integrative approach to environmental policy than traditional regulation. (John 1994, 10)

In John's conception, it is not clear how central the role of participatory and collaborative processes is. Clearly, the kinds of decision-making processes he has in mind are participatory, but it is not clear whether they necessarily must be. As the concept of civic environmentalism has evolved, however, participatory processes have become much more central. Much like the notions put forth by communitarians, civic environmentalists suggest that participatory processes are necessary to build the social capital required for the effective pursuit of sustainability. As Selman and Parker (1997) note in reference to the goals of the Local Agenda 21 process in the United Kingdom, there is some expectation that widespread participation in local environmental planning and programs will build better citizens, better consumers, and a more environmentally conscientious populace. This is an idea that is also present in numerous other recent works (Agyeman and Evans 1995; John and Mlay 1999; Shutkin 2003; Weber 2003). However, virtually all of the advocates of creating more environmental communitarian places embrace the expectation that the quality of decisions, both personal and institutional, will be different as a result. This can be seen with specific reference to some of the major impediments to local environmental protection. Starting with the problem of the tragedy of the commons, participatory processes and civic environmentalism are thought to offer solutions.

Sustainable Cities' Civic Engagement Opportunities

The conceptual rationale for greater participation in sustainable cities initiatives notwithstanding, the question remains, what have cities actually done to incorporate and promote greater civic engagement within the context of their efforts to become more sustainable? As noted earlier, many cities that have developed sustainable cities programs or initiatives have done so with some degree of reliance on participatory processes. Of the 41 cities studied as part of the broader assessment of sustainable cities, at least 34 have some form of participatory processes associated with their respective programs. Some of these participatory processes are more extensive than others, but only perhaps seven cities have developed their programs without much in the way of explicit participation from the public at large.

The participatory processes have taken many different forms, and public participation has manifested itself in many different ways. A few examples should suffice to illustrate the variation.

Although communitarian solutions to the serious issues that tend to undermine pursuit of local sustainability may seem at least somewhat plausible in theory and may find some indirect support in a variety of specific settings, to what extent can communitarian practices be said to be part of actual sustainable cities initiatives? In the best of all research worlds, it would be desirable to be able to point to analyses of the extent to which sustainable communities initiatives' participation processes can be said to have altered peoples' values, or at least started the process of rebuilding community. Unfortunately, there are no such analyses to point to. There are, however, some other critical questions about sustainable cities initiatives' communitarian foundations that reveal much about those initiatives. Are communitarian elements—those that stress the institutions and processes in civil society that are concerned with community building and interpersonal interactions—integral to specific sustainable cities initiatives? To what extent and in what ways have specific cities' initiatives been grounded in some conception of community and community building? What are these communitarian elements, and how are they manifest in practice? These questions may be addressed by exploring the manifestation of communitarian elements as they have found their way into the operation of cities' sustainable communities.

To state it succinctly, the central focus of communitarian elements of sustainable cities initiatives is the nature of the participatory processes in cities. As noted earlier, these participatory processes relate to two different aspects of sustainable cities. First, how participatory are the processes used to develop cities sustainability plans, particularly the processes associated with what is usually referred to as the *indicators project*? The sustainability indicators project, as it is practiced in many cities, represents an effort to develop fairly clear definitions (operationalizations) of what sustainability means and to measure progress toward becoming more sustainable over time. As a simple example, a city might include among its indicators the average daily amount of carbon dioxide in the ambient air over the course of a calendar year. Many indicators projects appear to be based on the notion that the project itself can and should serve as a primary vehicle for engaging the residents of the city in community-building exercises. Second, cities may elect to include participation indicators as explicit measures of sustainability. When a participation indicator is included in a sustainability plan, this represents a clear statement that community building ought to be a goal.

Even in cities where high levels of participation in political and governmental decision-making processes are not evident, it is still possible for cities' sustainability initiatives to seek to build community. For the most part, "building community" refers to efforts aimed at promoting greater interpersonal interaction, greater participation in civic organizations, and, in short, fostering civil society. For example, Seattle's Comprehensive Plan 2000, *Toward a Sustainable Seattle*, lays out a broad array of community-building goals and policies as part of the plan's human development element. These goals and policies include seeking to "make Seattle a place where people are involved in community and neighborhood life," "work toward achieving a sense of belonging among all Seattle residents," and "promote volunteerism and community service" (City of Seattle 2000). The key, however, is that the plan calls for a variety of specific city actions to promote this community building. Among the 41 cities I have studied, at least 28 have sustainability initiatives that promote some level and type of community building through greater participation. Of course, not all of these efforts are the same.

In Santa Barbara, California, an effort is made to promote civic engagement, and the South Coast Community Indicators Project specifies three indicators of civic engagement. The first is the total number of dollars collected by the Santa Barbara United Way; the second is the turnout in local elections; and the third is ticket sales from performing arts. Although these indicators resulted from a process that included 11 public meetings, this project does not appear to make any provision for any sort of ongoing participatory processes. Moreover, the indicators project itself is not accompanied by any sort of action plan, specification of programs or policies that should be pursued to promote more civic participation, or interventions that should be taken if the indicators point to declines over time.

A third example comes from the city of Jacksonville, Florida, where the Quality of Life Indicators Project includes an effort to monitor the amount of community participation and measures the amount of community participation annually through a telephone-based poll. Adult residents are asked whether they have given their time, without pay, to any charitable, religious, or volunteer organization. The project established a target of increasing reports of community participation to 75 percent of the adult population, an increase from the reported 60–65 percent found in recent surveys (Jacksonville Community Council 1999). However, there does not seem to be any significant programmatic mechanism in place for actually promoting more volunteerism.

What these three examples have in common is that they all specify community building as an important part of building a sustainable city. It may be surprising that, given the decision to include community building, there is so little explanation of what the cities expect to achieve by building community as they define it. Although commun-

itarian concepts often seek community-based participation as a mechanism for creating neighborhood stability and overcoming the three deadly sins associated with unsustainability, it is certainly not clear that the designated community-building activities and indicators bear any particular relationship to these goals. If a city achieves its target of increasing volunteerism, will that city necessarily achieve anything else? If Jacksonville increases its reporting of volunteerism to 75 percent of the adult population, will Jacksonville experience fewer NIMBY responses? Will it experience fewer situations involving the tragedy of the commons? The same questions can be posed for the community-building or civic engagement goals and indicators in most cities. In short, the relationship between cities' community building efforts and the achievement of other goals that are more directly related to sustainability is not clear.

Another way of looking at participation as community building is to examine whether cities' sustainability initiatives themselves are based on some form of participatory process. Short-term participatory processes that may be associated with the specific task of developing a sustainability plan or an indicators project are weak substitutes for long-term, open-ended participatory processes. But in practice, they still provide some insight into community-building opportunities made possible by cities' sustainability efforts. As Kline notes (cited in Zachary 1995, 7), one of the sometimes unstated goals of sustainable cities projects is the creation of a collaborative community participation process that will result in greater democracy and community building.

The process of developing sustainability initiatives in most cities does not seem to rely on any sort of extensive participation activities. As a general rule, sustainability initiatives seem to prefer polling and survey research techniques to obtain resident input into the process. Of course, polling and survey research can, if done properly, provide much more accurate information that is representative of the entire city population than participatory processes. Reliance on such techniques does not, however, promise to directly be a part of any community-building process. In other words, if the goal of engaging residents in the sustainability initiative is to make some contribution, however small, to building community, then most cities do not do this.

There are, however, examples of processes that seem to take seriously the idea that the development of sustainable cities programs can be a part of the community-building process. Either in the context of the development of a sustainability plan, including the development of sustainable indicators, or in the context of a broader comprehensive planning process, many cities use some form of visioning process to engage residents. The primary purpose of visioning processes is to get input from interested residents concerning the direction they would like to see the city move. Presumably, this purpose includes making the city government more responsive to the wishes of the populace, or at least an active part of it. Rarely are visioning processes thought of as mechanisms for community building or for changing the way participants think about sustainability, but that may in fact be a result.

The three most frequently cited examples of indicators projects with integral participatory processes are Seattle, Cambridge, and Chattanooga (Zachary 1995, 27–29). In the nonprofit-based Sustainable Seattle Inc. project, the process of developing sustainability indicators involved the participation of more than 250 volunteers who engaged in a series of civic forums and smaller committee group meetings. AtKisson (1999) reports these participants were elites who were self-selected after about 300 "people in positions of responsibility in government, business and a wide variety of civic organizations" were invited to participate in the process of developing indicators of sustainability. The apparent purpose of this involvement was to maximize the likelihood that a broad consensus would emerge in support of the use of the developed indicators. There was little explicit attention given to the possibility that the process of involving these volunteers would itself constitute a part of a community-building effort, but there were clear undercurrents to that effect. A number of the indicators that were developed sought to measure the extent of community participation in city activities. But Seattle's initiative embraced a commitment to participatory and interpersonal interactive processes well beyond that found in the indicators of sustainability. In the city government's 2000 draft comprehensive plan, *Toward a Sustainable Seattle*, there is an entire element devoted to human development in which "building supportive relationships within families, neighborhoods, and communities" is an explicit goal. Equally important, this is accompanied by a delineation of actions and programs that the city intends to engage in to promote greater participation in planning processes. It is perhaps less surprising that Seattle would define sustainability to include community-building goals and activities than it is there would be so little justification or explanation for doing so.

As part of a sustainable indicators project in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the Cambridge Civic Forum developed a participatory process generally referred to as *reaching in*, in which volunteers from the forum attended meetings of other civic organizations and community groups to elicit their input and visions for sustainability. Like Seattle, there was no stated goal of using the participatory processes associated with the indicators projects—or the sustainability initiatives in general—to contribute to democracy or to community building. Yet the participatory processes asso-

ciated with both efforts seem to recognize that if community building is an important target of sustainability indicators, then the development of those indicators must be done with as much participation as possible. Given the limited participation reported in the scattered descriptions of these projects and the fact that most of that participation emanated from special interest stakeholder groups, one can only speculate about its impact on community building.

Chattanooga's sustainability efforts evolved over a fairly long period of time, with a variety of foundations having been established starting in the early 1970s. The sustainability efforts as they appear today began in earnest with the Vision 2000 initiative that grew out of the work of the Lyndhurst Foundation and the Chattanooga Venture initiatives it supported during the early 1980s. Vision 2000 set in motion an effort to involve a wide array of community members and leaders in a process to consider the problems and solutions faced by Chattanooga and to define specific goals as ways of redressing these problems. This visioning process yielded six broad categories of goals focusing on "people, places, play, work, government, and future alternatives." During the early 1990s, apparently as a result of the perceived success of the Vision 2000 initiative, the Re-Vision 2000 initiative was undertaken, and this process invigorated a focus on sustainability (Parr 1998).

Chattanooga began this process as a troubled city. With the unfettered growth of the steel, coal, and other industries during the 1960s, Chattanooga developed some of the most serious pollution problems of any city in the nation. Air pollution during the 1960s was the worst problem: Residents were frequently required to drive their cars with their headlights on in the middle of the day because pollution had significantly reduced visibility (Graham 1999, 4). In 1969, L. Joe Ferguson, whose Chattanooga-based company Advanced Vehicle Systems, Inc., was created to build the city's electric bus fleet, noted about the state of air pollution, "Walter Cronkite announced on the news that we had the poorest air quality in the country, and boy, let me tell you we did" (Graham 1999, 5).

The Vision 2000 process, started in 1984, was born of deep concern over the economic decline of the city during the previous decade. Although the deindustrialization of the Chattanooga area, paralleling the decline of the domestic steel industry, had brought significant improvements in air pollution, it also had ushered in an era of economic decline and associated disinvestments in the city's economic base. In response to this decline, a number of organizations contributed to engaging the people of the city in a process to define new paths toward economic development. The issue became how to promote economic development without undermining the quality of life in the city. The consensus, even among business leaders, seemed to be that the city needed a healthy infusion of economic development, but not at the expense of the quality of life. No one wanted to return to the days when local industrial pollution undermined the quality of life. Out of this and related processes grew a series of specific projects and activities that, taken together, defined the nature of the sustainability program in Chattanooga. However, if the idea behind civic engagement in sustainability efforts is to transform participants and residents into environmentalists, then Chattanooga provides abundant ammunition for doubters. Far more than any of the other three cities profiled here, and more than most other cities commonly associated with sustainability, Chattanooga's initiatives were driven by economic development goals. In other words, sustainability seemed important to Chattanooga only to the extent that it could provide a vehicle for economic development—not exactly what advocates of sustainability usually have in mind.

Civic Engagement in Sustainable Cities Programs: A Research Agenda

If the pursuit of sustainability is at all a worthwhile endeavor, as more and more cities seem to believe it is, then it is vitally important to understand the connection between this pursuit and the broader civil society. The purpose of this discussion is not to advocate for sustainability programs per se, but to advocate a research agenda that will begin to address some of the central issues regarding civic engagement that these programs confront. This article has raised more questions than it answers, and some of these deserve special mention.

1. How extensive are the participation efforts associated with cities' sustainability programs? Although this article has outlined the shape of the participatory processes used by some cities, obtaining documentation on how participatory these processes are is elusive. How many people participated in the development of sustainability indicators, and over what period of time? Is the participation ongoing, that is, what is the level of participation in revisions of sustainability plans? What kinds of people participated? Is it just middle-class white residents? Are minority communities and communities of color represented? What is the role of the business community and other stakeholders?
2. Is there evidence to suggest that the context of sustainability can (and does) mobilize more people than other contexts? Are cities that experience fairly high levels of participation in their sustainability programs those that have regular, ongoing, especially neighborhood-based participation, such as Seattle, Portland, and Los Angeles? Or can the sustainability program serve as a vehicle for enhanced levels of participation beyond what otherwise would be expected?

3. Is there any reason to believe that efforts to engage the residents of cities have appreciably affected the character of the sustainability program? If public participation in the development of sustainability programs cannot be shown to have an effect, then perhaps Brugmann's argument is correct: Engagement of the public is superfluous, at best.
4. Has the incorporation of the public in the process of developing sustainability programs made those programs more palatable and politically acceptable? If the idea is that engagement can be used to convince local policymakers that sustainability is a goal worthy of being on the public agenda, is there any evidence that this works? Anecdotal evidence suggests that engagement is rarely effective, but there is no systematic evidence.
5. Are nonprofit organizations such as Sustainable Seattle or the Jacksonville Community Council better able to mobilize residents than participatory programs that are organized and sponsored by city government agencies?
6. Has the character of civic engagement efforts affected the sustainability program's ability to improve and protect the quality of the biophysical environment? Ultimately, the purpose of these sustainability programs relates to the environment. One argument put forth in favor of greater participation is that engaging in the process will change the participants, that is, it will convert participants into environmentalists and change their consumer behaviors. To date, there is virtually no evidence that participation has such an effect.
7. Has engagement of the public helped to overcome other political and social impediments to sustainability? An earlier review pointed to several recurring impediments: the NIMBY syndrome, the tragedy of the commons, and transboundary impacts. Have participatory processes been able to help overcome any of these impediments? Or have the participatory processes simply provided new opportunities for these impediments to manifest?

As efforts to address these and related questions expand, we will be able to build a much clearer picture of the promise and pitfalls of sustainable cities' civic engagement processes.

Notes

1. The general problem of externalities in local environmental policy continues to be one of the most formidable obstacles to progress in sustainable cities efforts.
2. At the top of the list are Seattle, Denver, Albuquerque, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis, which have adopted 27–30 of these programs. At the bottom of the list are Milwaukee, Lansing, Olympia, and New Haven, which have adopted only 6–8 of these.

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