

Sustainable Development

by Mahala Burns

Delivered at First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton on July 28, 2002

I told some friends that I was doing a service on Sustainable Development, and they were surprised that I could consider this issue a "church subject". But it is. The principles of our religion demand that we respect the web of life. Creating the environment in which we live our lives is a spiritual practice.

Those of us that are over 40 are very aware of how radically our towns have changed since we were kids. In the "good old days" before suburbs, malls, and freeways dotted our landscape, we had small and compact communities. We lived in towns with Main Streets and we walked or bicycled to our jobs and schools.

Once the automobile entered the American scene, families began to travel longer distances for business, entertainment and shopping. Downtowns all over America fell into disuse and decay. Virtually every large older city has lost population over the last 50 years. The move to suburbia is at the root of the downward spiral of our cities and colorful neighborhoods. Now we have become accustomed to miles of endless suburbs where one town blends into the next without any identifying features.

We in the Central Valley are directly in the path of the oncoming steamroller of growth. Our county is expected to TRIPLE its population by the year 2020. We are seemingly unable to stem the tide of growth, and we face powerful economic pressures that steer us away from sustainable development. The \$64,000 question is: Will we accommodate this new population with land-consuming sprawl development, or begin to implement Smart Growth?

What is sprawl development? Well, I think we can pull up a pretty good mental image of it. Some of the key elements are: endless dominos of housing tracts, strip malls, freeways, traffic jams. "Sprawl" designs cities for the convenience of cars, not the needs of pedestrians. Millions of acres of agricultural and desert land are lost each year to sprawl development.

Sprawl is expensive for the taxpayers, as we are forced to add infrastructure, fire, sewer, police and school services to all these outlying areas. We have produced some of the world's most inefficient cities. America is the only country in history to have more people living in its suburbs than in its cities. And sprawl development does not produce a city that moves us, that romances us, that provides us with quality of life.

Sprawl causes the loss of what Ray Oldenburg calls "the great good place". As he describes it, our society has three distinct places. The first place is our home. The second place is our business. The third is the place where we meet to socialize and be a part of our community life...to hold parades and watch fireworks, and march in protest and celebrate holidays. Sprawl destroys this place.

Here's an appalling little anecdote about a town on Long Island, NY:

In the 1980's the New York Islanders won the Stanley Cup four years in a row, and each year the team faced the same problem: it didn't have a downtown or Main Street where it could hold a victory parade. So each year fans gathered outside the Nassau Coliseum as the Islanders motorcade drove around the parking lot.

Sounds like a futuristic nightmare.

So, we don't want sprawl, and yet, sprawl is all we get. It's as if there was no other model for growth in California. The reason is because, while sprawl is more expensive for governments, it's cheaper for developers. If developers build on raw farmland, they don't have to deal with issues like historic renovation, toxic clean up, asbestos abatement, seismic retrofitting, and all the other restrictions heaped upon infill development.

The cities that we all admire are typically high-density walking cities. Cities that are densely populated have better economies and less crime. The Top 100 Most Occupied Cities in the World have less crime than the next tier of cities with the same populations but lower density, like Denver and L.A.

To quote Toronto's design director, "Anywhere that doesn't have congestion, you probably don't want to be there. In successful downtowns, cars should move at the speed of a horse and buggy."

In Italy, the street is considered "la dolce via." Writer James Fitch describes the American street as "merely process, a means of getting from where you are to where you want to be. The Italian street, on the other hand, is the actual stage of life itself. Business, courting, visiting, dining and politics—all these acts transpire here in the street."

With sprawl, everyone demands their own space and autonomy; they cocoon instead of congregate. We have few, if any "dolce via"s, and the ones we do have exist in our older areas and downtowns. The good news for Stockton is that, even though it's not thriving, we do HAVE a downtown with wide boulevards and places to congregate.

So what does the next 20 years hold for Stockton? How can we grow appropriately? How can we grow smart? Will we like the city we are creating?

Well, it's clear that without the support of our local government, market forces will determine what our community will look like.

However (as the joke goes) American government combines the efficiency of the post office with the compassion of the IRS. We don't want our government to be developers. But there is one thing a government can and should do: *Create incentives that level the playing field.*

Instead of placing extra costs on inner city and infill developers, governments need to do the opposite. It should be easier for developers to build infill housing than to build mega-housing tracts on farmland. Give developers reduced user fees and licensing fees for

infill development. Subsidize toxic abatement and seismic retrofitting costs. Pass along PG&E reductions. Cut taxes. Support green belts and community separators.

However we feel about it, growth is coming. If we leave it up to market forces, we will get more of the same—already the developers are snapping up all the farmland between Stockton and Lodi. Hundreds of homes are under construction; thousands are being planned. A regional super-center is going in on 8-Mile Road and I-5. Small business owners have already lost out to the big box stores on Hammer Lane, and now they will soon be outgunned by the super-centers.

None of it is pedestrian-oriented, or within walking distance of anything. None of it produces a city with character and identity and whimsy. If sprawl is to be diverted, it will take a lot of feisty, outspoken Unitarians harassing the City Council and the Board of Supervisors and guarding the General Plan and supporting the green belts and being watchdogs for small businesses. It will take all of us designing our community as if our children's lives depended on it.

I'd like to show you a few slides, mostly of Stockton, that illustrate what sustainable development is and is not.

The closing words were from an article on 'Feng Shui in Lodi' by Brooke Johnson:

Thirty spokes converge upon a single hub; it is at the hole in the center that the use of the cart hinges. We make a vessel from a lump of clay. It is the empty space within the vessel that makes it useful. We make doors and windows for a room, but it is these empty spaces that make the room livable. Thus, while the tangible has advantages, it is the intangible that makes it useful.

This page is copyright © 2002, Mahala Burns; Commercial Duplication Prohibited. Non-commercial reproduction with attribution is permitted; prior notice would be appreciated.