

## *What does a Sustainable community mean?*

The term sustainability, in its most basic meaning, implies “lasting.” Sustainable communities are communities that will be places of enduring value. The environmental movement, with its concern for conservation of resources, has stimulated a revival of interest in the sustainability of the human community. In the earliest history of human communities, selection of sites and towns and villages was based primarily upon the presence of water and soil suitable for agriculture—essentials to sustain human life. Sustainability along with common defense continued as the basic locational criteria until relatively recent times when the automobile and the long-haul truck allowed considerably extended community. This sudden increase of mobility allowed cities and urban development to spread out to the extent that much of the human scale of communities largely disappeared.

The concept of sustainability recalls the rationale for the design of the ancient Greek village, the *Plat of the City of Zion* of Mormon leader, Joseph Smith, and the Garden Cities of Ebenezer Howard. All these concepts called for communities to be located such that as many as possible of the essential agricultural products needed for the community could be produced in close proximity, with population size limited to that which could be sustained. As is characteristic of the neotraditional concept, sustainability envisions employment sites closely related to dwellings to reduce commuting time and resources: this contributes to the emphasis on human scale and social interaction.

Sustainable development is a strategy by which communities seek economic development approaches that also benefit the local environment and quality of life. It has become an important guide to many communities that have discovered that traditional approaches to planning and development are creating, rather than solving, societal and environmental problems. Where traditional approaches can lead to congestion, sprawl, pollution and resource over consumption, sustainable development offers real, lasting solutions that will strengthen our future.

Sustainable development provides a framework under which communities can use finite resources efficiently, create efficient infrastructures, protect and enhance the environment and quality of life, and create new businesses to strengthen their economies. It can help us create healthy communities that can sustain our generation, as well as those that follow ours.

The way we plan the physical layout, or land use, of our communities is fundamental to sustainability. Two main features of our land use practices over the past several decades have converged to generate haphazard, inefficient, and unsustainable urban sprawl that include the following:

1. zoning ordinances that isolate employment locations, shopping and services from housing; and
2. low-density growth planning that requires automobile access to increasing distant expanses of land.

The complex problems shared by cities throughout the U.S. are evidence of the impacts of urban sprawl – increasing traffic congestion and commute times, air pollution, inefficient energy consumption and greater reliance on foreign oil, loss of open space and habitat, inequitable distribution of economic resources, and the loss of a sense of community. For example, retirement and resort towns whose expansion results in urban pollution and congestion will grow themselves out of their source of tourist dollars.

Sprawl is described in the following terms: If the land is being consumed at a faster rate than population growth, then a metropolitan area can be characterized as “sprawling”. These elements include scattered, low-density development that uses a lot of land; and geographic separation of essential places, such as home, work and shopping; and dependency on automobiles.

### *What you can do:*

Community sustainability requires a transition from poorly-managed sprawl to land use planning practices that create and maintain efficient infrastructure, ensure close-knit neighborhoods and sense of community, and preserve natural systems.

Communities should evaluate growth proposals to determine if they are fiscally responsible, environmentally sound, and compatible with the local community.

To evaluate a project communities should ask if the development proposal would:

1. Use local resources faster than they can be replenished or replaced?
2. Impose disproportionate costs on those who receive little or no benefit?
3. Be one in the series of town expansions that together would lead to a sustainable future?
4. Produce products and by-products that are reusable, recyclable, or biodegradable?

The *American Planning Association Policy Guide on Planning for Sustainability* said that there is a growing concern for the issue of sustainability – whether the Earth’s resources will be able to meet the demands of a growing human population that has rising aspirations for consumption and quality of life, while maintaining the rich diversity of the natural environment or biosphere.

Patterns of human development - physical, social, and economic - affect sustainability at the local and the global level. City and regional planning is integrally related to defining

how, where, and when human development occurs, which affects resource use. Planners can therefore play a crucial role in improving the sustainability of communities and the resources that support them.

There are several dimensions to the "sustainability" issue:

1. Sustain communities as good places to live, and that offer economic and other opportunities to their inhabitants.
2. Sustain the values of our society – things like individual liberty and democracy.
3. Sustain the biodiversity of the natural environment, both for the contribution that it makes to the quality of human life and for its own inherent value.
4. Sustain the ability of natural systems to provide the life-supporting "services" that are rarely counted by economists, but which have recently been estimated to be worth nearly as much as total gross human economic product.

A sustainable community is one that is consistent with all of these dimensions of sustainability.

A range of indicators suggest that there is a growing gap between human consumption of resources and Earth's capacity to supply those resources and reabsorb resulting wastes.

*Sustainable Communities Network* links citizens to resources and to one another to create healthy, vital sustainable communities.

[www.sustainable.org](http://www.sustainable.org)