

## Plan-it sustainably *A report by Katja Irvin, AICP*

One thing sustainability planning experts are talking (and blogging) about these days is how to develop a shared vocabulary for practitioners in various fields to enable collaboration and effective sustainability planning. For starters, what exactly is *Sustainable Development*?

We have all heard the Brundtland Commission definition: Sustainable Development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (United Nations, 1987). This definition encapsulates the theory of sustainability but does not offer a framework for action. Fortunately, inspired academics have developed operational definitions and frameworks. Two powerful approaches are *Natural Capitalism* and *The Natural Step*.

**Natural Capitalism** (Amory and Hunter Lovins, Rocky Mountain Institute, Paul Hawken, 1999) advocates three central strategies for business and community sustainability:

- **Radical resource productivity** resulting in reduced operational costs, capital investment, and time. Planning-related examples include energy efficiency, water efficiency, downtown revitalization and infill, local businesses, and community supported agriculture. Savings can be invested to implement the next two strategies.
- **Biomimicry** (closed-loop systems) where every output is returned harmlessly to the ecosystem as a nutrient, or becomes an input for another process or use. Planning-related examples include building salvage, waste reuse, stormwater capture, and business expansion and retention programs.
- **Reinvest in natural capital** to prevent eroding of the basis of future prosperity. Planning-related examples include ecosystem restoration, urban ecosystems, eco-tourism, protecting and enhancing wetlands and vegetative cover, and preventing chemical contamination.

Source: Michael Kinsley, "Building Community Prosperity Through Natural Capitalism," 2007.

**The Natural Step** (TNS) framework for strategic sustainable development specifies four system conditions for a sustainable society in the biosphere.

In a sustainable society, nature is not subject to systematically increasing:

1. concentrations of substances extracted from the earth's crust,
2. concentrations of substances produced by society, or
3. degradation by physical means;

and, in that society,

4. people are not subject to conditions that systemically undermine their capacity to meet their needs.

TNS is a complete methodology for mapping these conditions to a specific situation. The method uses *backcasting*, a three-step process that includes developing a vision of the sustainable future we want, assessing current conditions, and brainstorming and implementing actions to bridge the gap between our current reality and our desired future.

Source: <http://www.naturalstep.org/the-system-conditions>.

Isn't this what we as planners already do? Generally it is, but often absent sustainability success strategies and the ongoing innovation required for success. Strategic frameworks like *TNS* and *Natural Capitalism* might provide the shared vocabulary that helps us go beyond regulatory compliance (general plans and climate action plans) into the realm of collaborative leadership.

**Stay tuned.** Future columns will delve more deeply into both of these models (and others) and provide examples of how they are being used in communities throughout Europe and North America.

**Committee update.** We're working on a website that will tell you more about who we are and what we hope to contribute to sustainability planning in northern California. Look for a link in May.

**Recommended Event of the Month.** APA Sustainable Community Planning (SCP) Interest Group reception at APA National Conference in Boston, <http://sustainableplanning.net>.

**Recommended Resource of the Month.** Sustainable Cities Collective, <http://sustainablecitiescollective.com> ■