Enhancing Justice and Sustainability at the Local Level:

Affordable Policies for Urban Governments

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Although few policymakers are opposed to "sustainability" in the abstract, urban governments with tight budgetary constraints face difficult choices when it comes to funding programs that would make a region more sustainable. Proposals that are environmentally sound and also help people at lower income levels are often regarded as noble but, alas, unaffordable. This essay suggests some ways that a city government can actually enhance the level of equity and sustainability with minimal financial commitments, through purchasing decisions of public agencies, partnerships with community organizations, and development of the small business sector. Specifically, we examine four areas where city governments can serve as a catalyst for projects at the intersection of enhanced equity and sustainability: food, energy, housing materials, and small businesses.

Background and Method

Our review examined city government web sites of the large, central cities in the twenty-largest metropolitan areas in the U.S. On this basis it seems that progress in establishing sustainability programs is at best incomplete. Portland and Seattle have offices specifically devoted to sustainability, whereas some cities have an environment department that includes sustainability issues within its purview (Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Francisco). A few other cities have an environmental office, a cross-departmental coordinating committee, or a program/initiative in the mayor's office (Cleveland, Dallas, Denver, Minneapolis, New York, and Phoenix). In the remaining eleven cities surveyed, there is no evidence of any

such programs, although sustainability initiatives do occur on a piecemeal basis in various departments, such as planning, parks and recreation, and neighborhoods departments.

Even where city governments have made sustainability a high-priority goal, there is little evidence to date of programs that connect sustainability to goals of achieving social justice. The connection can be made in two main ways. The first links the quest for sustainability with environmental justice, for example in the remediation of the toxic burden (air, water, and other pollution) of all neighborhoods, but especially low-income neighborhoods that carry a disproportionate share of toxic burdens (Agyeman and Bullard, 2004). Unfortunately, a survey of 77 U.S. cities that had a population in excess of 200,000 in 1990 revealed that only five had connected sustainability with environmental justice: Albuquerque, Austin, Cleveland, San Francisco, and Seattle (Warner, 2002).

A second important connection between sustainability and justice can be seen in a broad range of projects that build social justice goals into initiatives oriented toward urban greening (Agyeman, 2005a, 2005b). Our approach to "just sustainability" is consistent with those efforts, in that we focus on the equity dimension of attempts to promote the greening of cities. Specifically, we are interested in programs that can serve the double goal of enhancing urban sustainability while assisting low-income residents and developing new job opportunities. To that end, we have developed case studies of community gardens and urban farms, the greening of electricity and public transit, reuse centers and building deconstruction, and locally-oriented, green, small business

development. This paper synthesizes our policy-related findings based on interviews with government leaders and community organizations who are working on those issues.

In selecting the topics for study, we chose two main geographic regions: the northwest (northern California, Portland, and Seattle) and the northeast. The choice was based partly on our proximity to sites in the northeast and partly on the fact that projects of this kind are now, by and large, best developed in these two regions of the country. We were also able to complete case studies from a few cities in the South and Midwest. Specifically, we examined community gardening and urban agriculture in Austin, Boston, Denver, Cleveland, Detroit, New York, Philadelphia, Portland, Sacramento, San Francisco, and Seattle; the greening of municipal power and/or transit systems in Austin, Chattanooga, Oakland, Sacramento, San Franciso, and Seattle; reuse centers in Austin, Baltimore, Burlington, Oakland, Pittsburgh, and Portland; and locally oriented/green business networks in Austin, Philadelphia, San Fransisco, and Washington, D.C. Our goal was to conduct as many site visits as possible, given our budgetary and time constraints, and to explore the issues that have emerged in some of the programs throughout the country. All case studies are currently available at <http://www.davidjhess.org/sustlocCasesTOC.html>. Unless otherwise noted, our information on specific cities and programs is based on the case studies.

Community Gardening and Urban Agriculture

The key to understanding community gardening and related activities (such as small, urban farms) is to acknowledge that they are not merely about food provisioning. It might be better to think of them as educational or community development institutions

that occupy an alternative form of recreational activity in urban green spaces. In other words, community gardening and urban agriculture provide enormous benefits to cities beyond the obvious value of the food they provide the gardeners. In many cases community gardens have extra plots, where they grow food for food banks, and they have established ties to local agricultural networks (such as farmers' markets), which contribute to food security in the community (Gottlieb and Fisher, 1996). In addition, community gardens tend to develop neighborhood networks, reduce crime rates, promote public health, provide a setting for food education, and otherwise enhance the civic culture of a neighborhood (Armstrong, 2000; Lawson, 2005).

The pattern of community gardening varies significantly across American cities. In the Northeast and upper Midwest, cities frequently have many vacant and abandoned properties, and city governments have sometimes converted abandoned lots that have defaulted to government ownership. Cleveland's land bank is one example of a mechanism established by a city government to allow community groups to garden unused land. A land bank loans land to a community gardening group, but at some later date the city may still sell the land. When allowing community groups to use vacant lots for gardening, the city needs to consider the length of tenure. Conversion of a vacant lot to gardening requires considerable investment from the gardeners, and they are likely to develop and maintain the garden if they have a long-term agreement with the city. The city also needs to figure out a way to facilitate the conversion of the land so that it is cultivated safely. The city may have the funding to provide start-up services, such as soil testing, soil remediation, initial materials, and education and training. In other cases the city can rely on a nonprofit group, a foundation, and/or the university extension office to

provide the start-up support. In most of our cases, the extent of a city government's support for community gardening was limited to one staff person. In a few cases community-development block grants have been used to fund community gardening programs. In Cleveland, police also work in gardens on a voluntary basis, and in other cities community gardens have been located in underutilized or crime-ridden parks. Police need to work with community gardens to protect them against vandalism, but in turn the presence of community gardeners on a site can be a first step toward cleaning up a crime-ridden neighborhood.

Beyond using vacant property that has defaulted to the city, community gardens can also be located on public property sites such as parks, schoolyards, and public infrastructure land. Those sites are especially important options in cities where land values are high and empty lots are rare, but they are can be found even in cities with large amounts of abandoned property. In some cases community gardens programs are located in the department of parks and recreation; in other cases they are placed in a department of neighborhoods. The choice of locating the program in one city department or another depends on local urban politics; garden managers have told us that what matters most is to be located in a strong department where there is support for the program. In some cases parks and recreation departments have resisted community gardening. They may view the extension of mandate to be a form of mission drift, and they may also be concerned that the addition of community gardening would constitute extra work for an over-stretched staff. It helps if community gardens associations and program managers harmonize their work with the departmental mission by emphasizing the recreational dimension of community gardens over food-provisioning. Likewise, if they are housed in

a neighborhoods or community development department, community gardens need to be defined as a form of community development. Community gardening representatives have reported that over time once recalcitrant members of parks and recreation departments come to see that community gardening actually has many benefits for the parks. Not only does the presence of a community garden on a park site tend to result in lower crime, but community gardeners sometimes also help in maintaining the park in general.

Today community gardens on school grounds are gaining popularity. Students and teachers often express enormous enthusiasm for them, particularly if some of the produce is consumed in the school cafeteria. However, because of the difficulty of maintaining school gardens during the summer holiday season, some of the successful school gardens have actually been community gardens located on school grounds. During the summer holidays, community gardeners can help maintain school plots that might otherwise be neglected. Schools can also be sites for farm-to-cafeteria programs, which support local farms and educate students about the value of fresh, locally grown food. Just as important, community gardens on school yards can be used for a variety of educational tasks, including teaching mathematics, biology, geology, economics, and other sciences.

Community gardens flourish in cities where there is a strong, nonprofit advocacy organization that can build partnerships with the city government. In some cases the organization has acquired land for the larger community gardens. For example, Philadelphia Green found that when deciding where to allocate scarce resources, it is better to prioritize the larger, more established gardens, because the smaller gardens tend

to disappear when key members leave. Churches and other community organizations can sometimes also provide access to land and other support. Working through local religious and ethnic organizations helps get the word out to the neighborhood, helping solve linguistic and cultural issues as they arise. The city government representative can leverage scarce resources by convening meetings and developing networks that include a nonprofit advocacy organization, gardeners, religious organizations, schools, and ethnic/neighborhood groups. The city government can also help by establishing a fair, standardized policy on waiting lists and guidelines on farming techniques. Although many of the large gardens use organic agricultural methods, we found that some of the immigrant gardens do not understand such methods and need education about intensive horticulture. The large gardens can also serve as repositories of knowledge and places where new gardeners can go to learn about gardening. Because the work of gardeners is voluntary, the city government can serve primarily as a source of networking and information exchange without incurring the full costs of educational programs.

At a broader level, several community gardens representatives noted that city governments that have a general plan should include community gardening in the plan. The plan may define gardens as part of overall green-space goals (such as 10% of all land), or it may explicitly develop a target ratio of the number of community gardens per person, as the city of Seattle has done. The formation of a food policy council and food charter can also be part of a city government's goals. Those organizations build networks around food and agriculture often broader than the community gardening networks discussed above. For example, the city government can help to articulate organizations with a wide range of local food-related activities, including food security, farmers'

markets, farm-to-restaurant and farm-to-cafeteria programs, school gardens, and community gardens. The city can also encourage private gardens, such as rooftop gardens in new apartment buildings or garden requirements for new housing developments. In Seattle rooftop gardens on apartment buildings and condominiums have been especially popular, and developers have found that they help sell properties. In Portland, Oregon, a separate organization exists to assist people to establish private gardens. The city also maintains a nonprofit urban farm, which not only produces food but serves as an educational site for school tours. In Philadelphia, the city supports a program of vacant lot greening, which can lead to the establishment of new community gardens.

Although some of the proposals can be expensive—such as acquiring land for community gardens or remediating toxic soil in abandoned lots—many of the proposals can be accomplished by leveraging existing resources and voluntary action from the community. In this sense, the primary role of the city government can be to serve as a catalyst for the self-organizing work of neighborhood and nonprofit organizations. Some of the most successful programs at present are based upon multi-organizational partnership models (Chatterton and Style, 2001; Evans, 2002). In this mode, as cities connect community gardening to general plans for greenspace development and utilization, they also bridge three important goals: recreation, food provisioning, and neighborhood development.

Energy and Public Agencies

Some large American cities are fortunate to have retained control over their electric utilities, and as a result their public power agencies have tremendous potential to reduce greenhouse gas emissions at a local level while spurring the growth of small business (Morris 2001). Public power agencies can be tapped to provide community assistance that promotes just sustainability, for example programs in low-income weatherization. In cities such as Austin, Sacramento, and Seattle, the public power utilities have invested in wind, solar, and other forms of renewable energy, and they also offer incentives for residential and business investments in distributed renewable energy, such as rooftop solar. Programs to develop distributed energy can be configured to help develop a locally owned, independent business sector of renewable energy installers. Investments of this kind may even help develop a primary industry of manufacturers around new, renewable energy technologies.

Because most large American cities do not have public power agencies, they are less able to press their investor-owned utilities into developing low-income weatherization programs or renewable, distributed energy programs. One option is to convert to public power. Our case study of San Francisco, which attempted to convert from investor-owned to public power, shows the long, difficult battles that can ensue. Furthermore, the transition to public power may require huge investments in obtaining both the technical expertise and the infrastructure needed to take over electricity generation and transmission. Finally, in a neoliberal political environment, municipalization of a privately owned business can become an uphill battle of rhetoric and ideology.

One alternative that has emerged for cities that have investor-owned utilities is "community choice aggregation." A half dozen states have passed laws that encourage innovations of this kind. For example, San Francisco failed at its effort to convert to public power, but it is currently pursuing community choice aggregation. Under community choice, a city can aggregate all electricity customers, and it can bid out the entire customer base. Unlike green pricing schemes, where customers opt in on an individual basis, under community choice customers may opt out during a specified opt-out period. Whereas municipalization tends to be expensive and runs into ideological conflicts with the prevailing neoliberal political culture, community choice takes advantage of market-based, private-sector mechanisms. By aggregating electricity demand and seeking competitive bids**,** a city can reduce its overall electricity costs and pass on the savings to residences and businesses. It is possible, as occurred in northern Ohio, to use the competitive bidding process to reduce the aggregate energy bill and to convert to greener energy sources at the same time. San Francisco is experimenting with another logical step forward: combining community choice with renewable energy bonds. By leveraging the city's bond authority, the city can stipulate that the electricity contract also includes renewable energy construction and energy conservation, the benefits of which are retained by the city and its residents over the long term. There are many details on how to structure community choice laws and aggregation contracts for them to be successful; Paul Fenn (2005) is the key architect of several such laws and a leader of the movement to establish community choice in California. If the San Francisco model proves successful, community choice will be able to leverage investor-owned utilities and the city bond authority to develop investments in distributed, renewable energy and

conservation. As with public power agencies that are investing in distributed and renewable energy, the contracts can help spur the development of a local installation and renewable energy manufacturing industry.

Another policy area where the city government can leverage existing resources regarding energy consumption is in vehicle fleet decisions. The discussion here will focus on urban bus fleets, which involve significant resources and can significantly impact air quality in a region. City transit fleet managers often face tight budgets for fleet replacement and pressure from regulatory agencies and citizen groups that demand rapid conversion to cleaner buses. In Atlanta, Boston, Los Angeles, New York and San Francisco, environmental justice groups have organized to clean up urban bus fleets and reduce the exposure of urban residents to high amounts of diesel exhaust, especially in neighborhoods located near bus yards. By the mid 1990s the natural gas industry and environmental justice groups were advocating conversion to buses powered by natural gas, but improvements in techniques that curb diesel bus emissions since that time have narrowed some of the differences between the two technologies. Some cities are currently investing heavily in hybrid diesel buses. Seattle, for example, was able to obtain federal government support for its purchase of hybrids, but in general federal government support for bus conversion has not been adequate to meet the needs of urban fleet managers.

As new technologies become available, some transit agencies are able to coordinate decisions promoting green urban bus fleets with policies that enhance local economic development. For example, some transit agencies, such as the Seattle area agency, are using biodiesel blends (usually below 20%, the point at which engine

manufacturers may place warranties in jeopardy). By purchasing biodiesel for buses and ethanol for other urban fleets, cities can help develop local agricultural and refining industries. In California, Alameda-Contra Costa Transit District is leveraging state and local funds for hydrogen development to partner with an in-state company, which is helping to build hyrdrogen buses. Similarly, in Santa Barbara, Chattanooga, and a few other cities, transit agencies have experimented with electric downtown circulator buses. In Chattanooga the bus purchase contracts helped to launch a local manufacturer of small electric buses. For a time, the firm developed into a successful enterprise and brought manufacturing jobs to the city. Unfortunately, it later tried to expand into new markets and failed. Nevertheless, the general goal of import substitution— shifting bus and fuel purchases to local businesses—remains a valuable lesson for how vehicle purchase decisions can be leveraged to bring new business development to the region.

Another way to leverage existing resources is by combining parking and traffic management policies with urban transit fleet conversion strategies. For example, San Francisco has parking and traffic management under the same roof as its transit agency, so that policies can be developed in tandem. As of 2005 the city was considering a toll on traffic entering the downtown area, both to reduce traffic and to fund public transit options. In a similar move, Chattanooga has used high-frequency, electric circulator buses to help redevelop the downtown business district. The service has been so successful with riders that other neighborhoods started to ask for extensions of the service**.** The high-frequency buses are free of charge and used by tourists, downtown businesses, and residents of low-income neighborhoods alike. At either end of the route there are two parking garages, where bus maintenance and battery change-out takes

place. The garages also capture automobile traffic and parking revenues used to support the electric circulators. (One of the garages is located at the off ramp of an exit from a major highway, so it can capture traffic as it flows into the downtown area.) From a technological and community-development perspective, the new Chattanooga buses have been a success. Because the electricity comes largely from hydropower, the buses also contribute to greenhouse gas reduction.

The Reuse Sector

The reuse sector includes second-hand businesses that sell used clothing, books, furniture, and other household items; the thrift sector of nonprofit, charitable organizations such as Goodwill and Salvation Army; flea markets and rummage sales; and yard or garage sales (Andrews and Maurer 2001). Although resale is one of the most rapidly growing sectors in the retail industry, city governments have not done much to capitalize on it as a source of job growth and community revitalization. Some smaller cities organize town-wide yard-sale days, and some cities also have business districts where antique and "junk" stores are more common. Yet, to the best of our knowledge, American cities have not yet made concerted efforts to develop second-hand business districts.

One aspect of the resale industry where local governments could play a more concerted role is the development of reuse centers. A reuse center is a large home-supply store that sells used goods. In the larger reuse centers, there are departments that sell windows, doors, plumbing, appliances, electrical fixtures, hardware, lumber, and so on. Some of the centers are for-profit businesses, but often they are nonprofit enterprises that

have a mission of employment and job training for low-income residents and/or environmental sustainability. As a result, resuse centers are another instance of an organization situated strategically at the intersection of justice and sustainability. The centers can be integrated with urban job training and community service programs while low-income residents can benefit from access to an extraordinary range of affordable household items. Furthermore, because over a third of the landfilled material is construction debris, and because much of that debris is from renovations, reuse centers can help prevent a significant amount of home materials from becoming landfill.

A reuse center can be leveraged to support a variety of other businesses and nonprofit endeavors. For example, some reuse centers support furniture remanufacturing, which provides additional jobs and high-quality furniture made from recovered lumber. Many of the reuse centers have also started a deconstruction business, which dismantles buildings carefully with teams of workers rather than demolishing them by machines. In some cases, revenues from the reuse centers also support community organizations and activities. For example, the centers that are run by Habitat for Humanity (such as the Austin Re-Store) also serve as supply depots for the home construction projects, with revenues from the sale of materials used to help the organization to build more affordable housing.

City governments could assist the development of reuse centers in a variety of ways. If tipping fees are higher for demolition than deconstruction, the city could help equalize the costs of demolition. Likewise, the city could even require the full deconstruction of public buildings, and demolition permits could be structured to require that a minimum percentage of materials be diverted from landfills into reuse. Building

codes could be changed to ensure that new construction uses materials and assembly techniques that assume future deconstruction. The city could also help the reuse industry to change state and federal tax codes to allow a write-off for the full value of the deconstructed house, rather than the resale value. To encourage development of new reuse centers, the city could help find space, including abandoned buildings; provide zoning changes or variances where needed; coordinate job training and community service programs with the reuse center; connect reuse centers with Habitat-for-Humanity and other rebuilding programs; provide assistance with insurance fee structures for deconstruction; and advertise with residents to channel reusable items to the reuse centers. Cities can also host monthly collection events and develop policies that do not allow residents and businesses to throw out reusable items, such as computers and windows. Finally, as we mentioned at the beginning of this section, cities could develop plans and assist businesses that might want to relocate to a used goods retail district, where shoppers could come to buy clothing, books, furniture, appliances, building materials, and a wide range of other goods.

Local and Green Business Associations

In large U.S. cities the Chamber of Commerce tends to be dominated by large, publicly traded corporations and the service sector that works directly with those firms. The pattern creates an opportunity for business associations oriented to the small business sector. To date, three major alternative local business organizations have emerged in the U.S. The American Independent Business Alliance (AMIBA) primarily serves locally owned, independent retail businesses. It has been active in campaigns to level the

playing field for Main Street retailers faced with the competition of big-box retailers and formula businesses (such as franchises). In contrast, the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE) works with a wider range of businesses; it seeks to transform businesses so that their personnel policies are more just and their environmental practices and products more sustainable. BALLE does not allow publicly traded corporations among its members, so its focus is upon locally owned, independent businesses and the strategy of "import substitution" as a mode of local economic growth (Shuman 2000). Like AMIBA, BALLE runs local first campaigns that draw consumers to locally owned retail outlets, but unlike AMIBA, the organization also provides information for members who wish to purchase from other members in distant chapters. Finally, Co-op America affirms both social responsibility and environmental sustainability as key missions. Unlike BALLE, it includes publicly traded corporations in its membership, and it uses programs that encourage greater social and environmental responsibility within the publicly traded sector. Co-op America is also more national in orientation, but it has begun to develop "Green Page" catalogs for use at the local level.

There are many imaginative ways in which an urban government can partner with local and green business associations to develop the local economy. For example, in Austin the AMIBA chapter has developed the IBIZ (Independent Business Development Zones) program, which provides advertising, logos in doors, streetlight signs, brochures, maps, and special event days to connect shoppers with locally owned businesses. One example of a special event day is "First Thursday," a monthly event when merchants of the South Congress Avenue district stay open late and sponsor special events aimed at attracting customers to the neighborhood. The chapter has also worked to get more

locally owned businesses into new retail developments and to develop a trade show with business development workshops. BALLE chapters have sponsored "buy local" campaigns that involve web- and print-advertising, guest speakers, special events, and other ways of connecting consumers with local businesses. BALLE chapters also host meetings that educate business members on how to green their enterprises and make them more socially responsible. Some leading BALLE businesses could be classified as "eco-preneurs" (Beveridge, 2005). Co-op America's locally oriented programs have focused upon attracting investors, such as its "1% in community" campaign, which urges members to put at least 1% of their investments in community investments, such as local credit unions or a community development bank.

A white paper published by the Sustainable Business Network of Greater Philadelphia, the founding BALLE chapter, outlined several possible ways that city governments could assist in the development of the locally-owned, small business sector. City governments can support buy-local campaigns, develop green (and used materials) procurement standards for purchasing, and put into effect green building codes (see also Day, 2005; Moore and Engstrom, 2005). The city can also conduct studies of where business losses are occurring and where regional assets are located, and it can develop regional indicators to identify where resources can be directed to help local businesses. Tax policies can be examined to identify opportunities for using the tax structure to support locally owned, independent businesses, and for eliminating breaks for non-local business competitors.

Some cities and counties have taken the next step by passing ordinances that limit the size of retail businesses or place explicit limitations on formula businesses (Mitchell

2001, 2003). Especially in small cities and tourist destinations, formula businesses can be detrimental to the local economy by reducing the uniqueness and charm of the location. Bar Harbor, Maine is a good example of a community that has recently prospered through policies that encourage locally owned downtown shops while discouraging franchises by large, national chain stores. More generally, an emerging set of studies indicates that purchases from locally owned businesses have a greater positive multiplier effect on the local economy than purchases from retail outlets owned by distant corporations (e.g., Civic Economics, 2002). More research is needed to document the effect and to build up a base of scientific knowledge that can be used to combat attacks against buy-local campaigns.

Conclusion

The prospect of developing a more just and sustainable regional economy and society is appealing but may seem too expensive to attempt. If the coffers of a city or county government were overflowing, it would be relatively easy to invest in the many possible projects that grassroots groups might propose. Unfortunately, many American cities today confront tight budgets and cutbacks in basic services. Under such conditions, the greening of the region, let alone a form of greening that also addresses issues of inequality and assistance to low-income residents, may seem impossibly utopian.

In this essay we suggest that there are ingenious, affordable ways to address community development and also achieve goals of environmental sustainability. The approaches that we have discussed—community gardens, community choice electricity, import substitution strategies for green bus fleets, reuse centers, resale and local business

districts, and local and green business associations—can be set up in a way that leverage the power of the city government at minimal cost. In the case of community gardens and reuse centers, the programs operate in partnership with nonprofit organizations and grassroots volunteer action (gardeners and reuse advocates). The city government can play the role of coordinator, supporter, and facilitator of land tenure. In the energy programs, city government can structure renewable energy conversion so that jobs are created for locally owned businesses, such as distributed energy installers and electric bus manufacturers. Leveraging community choice policies and parking policies, a city can generate revenue to support new investments. Assisting the development of locally owned business associations, the city government can help to develop a vital sector of the local economy that provides good jobs that are not hostage to outsourcing and the run-away shop syndrome.

In sum, it is possible to create policies and projects that create dynamic links between the ends of sustainability and social justice. Cities can pursue both goals by creating new coalitions and moving the frame for environmental policy away from the mistaken idea that there is a trade-off between jobs and environmental quality (Gibbs, 2003). The strategies we have suggested here can create good jobs that improve both the economy and quality of life. Along this path it is possible to address issues of environmental justice through long-term strategies that foster conditions of economic prosperity beneficial to citizens at all income levels, giving them a shared stake in the region's future.

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