Livable Places
Emerging Trends in Community Planning and Design

March 2010

19th Annual Ahwahnee Conference – An "Aha!" Moment: At the very first Ahwahnee conference nineteen years ago, we unveiled new principles for compact, walkable growth as an alternative to urban sprawl. Light bulbs went off in the room as the local elected officials in attendance realized they no longer had to fight growth/no growth battles. There was a way that communities could grow and make their communities even better.

Many of us at this year’s conference experienced another breakthrough in our thinking, another "Aha!" moment. Much of the work that our members have undertaken to create healthy, walkable communities, promote local food consumption, improve water availability and quality, reduce and recycle waste, and reduce consumption of nonrenewable energy is now key to providing continuing employment opportunities for our residents and improving overall economic resilience.

The most recent Field Poll shows that today, jobs and the economy are the chief concern of 69% of the electorate: far fewer care about energy costs, water, the environment and global warming. However, at this year’s conference we discovered that the measures that LGC members continue to implement to address the aforementioned issues are actually growing jobs at the same time that employment opportunities in conventional technologies are on the decline.

Transportation and Health — Where Our Money Goes: Transportation consultant Jim Charlier, a popular speaker at our New Partners for Smart Growth conferences, pinpointed two issues that are key to future economic vitality: Vehicle miles traveled and health.

Charlier pointed out that people who live in auto-dependent communities have 16% less discretionary money to spend on local goods and services than those who live where they can walk, take transit, or ride a bike to their daily destinations.

Of even more concern is the fact that oil prices are going to continue to rise. While there is plenty of the black stuff available, new sources are more expensive to extract. To make matters worse, there will be far more demand for that oil — it is expected that by 2020, there will be twice as many cars on the road as there are today, largely due to increasing auto use in China and India.

Expected fluctuations in the cost of oil will create even more economic challenges. Every time oil prices go up, consumer demand for discretionary goods and services — from restaurants to hair salons — evaporates, along with the related jobs. Today, economic resilience is worse than it has been since the Great Depression and according to Charlier, this will continue to be the case as long as transportation systems are heavily dependent on oil.

Health now consumes 20% of GDP, $147 billion annually. At past Ahwahnee Conferences, we have learned that people who live where it’s comfortable and convenient to walk or ride a bike are healthier because they are more active. Reducing our auto dependence will not only reduce our dependence on expensive oil, it will reduce our spending on health care.

Green Jobs Key To Our Economic Future: One of the many outstanding speakers at the Ahwahnee was Doug Henton, a highly regarded economic consultant, who identified green businesses as a rapidly growing segment of California’s economy. He defined the green economy as businesses that provide products and services that: 1) provide alternatives to carbon-based energy sources, 2) conserve the use of energy and all natural resources and 3) reduce pollution and recycle waste.

Andrew Altevogt, Deputy Secretary of Cal EPA, clarified the market for these products and services by summarizing the resource challenges ahead. In addition to shortages of oil, we face shrinking water supplies and rising temperatures. Products and services that can address this triple threat will be in high demand.

The business community is already on top of this need. According to Many Shades of Green, authored by Henton, in 2007-2008 alone, green jobs grew 5% while total jobs declined by 1%.

Henton has identified regional clusters of green jobs by type, throughout California. The Los Angeles area boasts the largest number of jobs in energy efficiency. Jobs in energy generation (including solar, wind, geothermal, and biomass) are growing particularly rapidly in the central coast. Other regions with strong activity in alternative energy development are Orange County and the Sacramento Valley, San Diego and the North Coast.

Green jobs in transportation, particularly alternative fuels and equipment, have burgeoned in Orange County and the San Joaquin Valley. The Bay Area is strongest in transportation logistics, including transit-oriented development.

Water conservation and wastewater treatment specialties are growing most rapidly in the San Diego and Sierra regions. Sacramento is a hub of activity for jobs in consulting related to air and the environment.

When asked about the importance of AB 32 in encouraging innovation, Henton replied that businesses need certainty. AB 32 and other State energy policies have provided that certainty.

This is a time for innovation, but we have some...
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