

What's "Sustainable"?

by Dave Stauffer

If your commission is like the one in my town, more developers and applicants are loading their designs with features intended to impress you because they're "sustainable."

But ask them what they mean by sustainable and you're likely to get responses ranging from a blank look to a treatise on every person's obligation to help save the planet.

So, what's "sustainable"?

The most common definition seems to be that offered by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development's 1987 Brundtland Report, stating that sustainable development "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

The International Institute for Sustainable Development quotes the U.N. definition and adds, "The concept of sustainable development ... helps us understand ourselves and our world. The problems we face are complex and serious – and we can't address them in the same way we created them. But we *can* address them."

Others reach back in history to cite, for example, the "Great Law of the Iroquois," which supposedly commanded sustainability by declaring, "In every deliberation we must consider the impact on the seventh generation."

For the past few years, as chairman of a regional business group whose below-the-logo tagline is "Advancing Sustainable Enterprise," I've read and heard a lot about sustainability and sustainable development. Among my conclusions:

We're a long way, in consensus and

time, from universal agreement on a definition of sustainability.

- It's nice, but not crucial, that we agree on a definition.
- What is crucial is that we who are asked to weigh claims of sustainability come up with a practical definition that we can use day-to-day to make the decisions that come before us.

SUSTAINABILITY MAY BE HARD TO DEFINE, BUT IT'S VITALLY IMPORTANT TO OUR COMMUNITIES.

That's no simple task. Opinions on a project's sustainability will often range widely among commissioners. Moreover, assessing a project's attributes will seldom be a matter of black or white, but rather a frustrating gray.¹

But gray terms are nothing new for us; we toil in a realm of squishy definitions. We shouldn't – and in my opinion can't – shy away from our own determination of whether project features really are sustainable.

How might we do that?

Make developers or applicants do the heavy lifting. When they tout their project's sustainability, ask how they define that term. Then ask them to explain how their sustainable features meet that definition. Don't settle for generalities: get names of processes, materials, and methods. Also be sure to ask what additional up-front amount they're spending, beyond regulatory requirements, to achieve long-run sustainability.

Give an "A" for effort. Sustainability means different things to different people, has no widely accepted metrics, and – truth to tell – few projects that come before us can be called sustainable. So (without ignoring any stated require-

ments for project approval) cut some slack for applicants who show you they've made a commendable effort to fashion a project that conserves resources, respects its surroundings, and is built to last.

Devise and think through your own list of sustainable project features. My current list includes attributes of —

- ✓ Scale – a good fit with neighbors, neither ramshackle nor grandiose.
- ✓ Access and mobility – it's easy to get into, out of, and around in.
- ✓ Consumption & waste – efforts to minimize are evident and effective.
- ✓ Re-use – makes use of recycled building materials when feasible.
- ✓ Location & siting – makes the most of orientation to sun, topography, wind, natural and man-made infrastructure.
- ✓ Absence – preserves open space and is no larger than necessary for its functions.

Stay flexible in defining sustainability. There's nothing wrong with a changing concept of what sustainability is or how a project achieves it; sustainability as its own field of study is far from mature. As you review more applications that claim sustainability, stay open to refining your own criteria.

Given the state of our world today, especially our accelerating depletion of natural resources and rising costs of man-made resources, sustainability is certain to gain ever-increasing attention. It may be hard to define, but it's vitally important to our communities. ♦

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¹ The extent to which our evaluations of sustainability may influence, or serve as a basis for, our decisions to approve a project will likely vary based on local codes and/or state enabling laws. Seek guidance from your planning staff on your options.