

Sustainable Communities

The notion of “sustainable communities” is not new. Various examples have been noted historically, with indigenous agrarian peoples and limited population in rural areas. Such communities were dependent upon the local environment to provide food, water, clothing and shelter and often featured a division of labor with different skilled craftsmen and laborers providing different goods and services for the community at large. The community remained sustainable provided it did not exceed the carrying capacity of the land to provide, or the assimilative capacity of the land and water to accept wastes.

More recently, the idea of a sustainable community has arisen to help correct some of the deficiencies of modern urban industrial society, which too often features congestion, lengthy commuting times and limited modes of transportation, pollution of air and water, blighted neighborhoods and a diminished quality of life.

There is a size continuum of what could be considered to be a “community”. However to be truly sustainable, the community will generally exemplify several key elements. The community will offer both employment opportunities and nearby housing options. The community will promote the use of renewable resources and locally-available resources; will offer transportation alternatives (including walking and bike paths); will offer opportunities for community gardens and locally-grown food; will offer local shopping, goods and services; and will strive to offer a high quality of life. Like the natural ecology, sustainable communities are sustained by a series of symbiotic relationships among local firms, people and institutions. At the next level the community will develop symbiotic relationships with the region, and then the nation and world. Trade flows will provide what cannot be provided locally. Ethicist Larry Rasmussen defines and describes several additional social elements which he believes will be necessary to truly achieve “sustainable community”: participation, solidarity, sufficiency, suffering, material simplicity, spiritual richness, responsibility and accountability. ¹ Clearly, sustainable communities will reflect a wide variety of ingenuity and human values and will accommodate a variety of human individuality.

Sustainable Communities: Up Close and Personal

We all may not have the opportunity to live in a community which has been designed, planned and built specifically to be a sustainable community. But often we can take measures to make our own community more sustainable and provide a better quality of life. These measures might include:

- (1) Living near a place of employment
 - (2) Using alternate forms of transportation
 - (3) Participating in community associations
 - (4) Lobbying for the availability of renewable energy
 - (5) Utilizing community gardens and/or locally-available fresh produce
 - (6) Supporting local merchants and businesses for goods and services
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1 Larry Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, N.Y. , 1996, 364 pp.