

Restoring Local Economy and Community

by Nancy Price

There's a long history in the U.S. of intentional alternative communities: religious, utopian, counter-cultural, and back-to-the-land. Peak oil and global warming, however, create an urgency and necessity to create an alternative lifestyle for the whole society. The growing number of

localization and sustainable non-profit community programs nationwide is not an alternative counter cultural movement.

It is a broad-based, all-inclusive transformation of mainstream culture. Even before peak oil, certain communities and regions were already moving in this direction because of unsustainable development, globalization with job loss and economic dislocation, big-box malling, sprawl, traffic, poor air quality, loss of open space and farmland. Now, in small rural towns such as Willits and Nevada City,

California, large metropolitan centers such as Tucson, Arizona, and bio-regions such as the Hudson Valley, New York, people have formed non-profit groups to create economic localization projects dependent upon the characteristics of the community and region. "Sustainable Tucson" begins with neighborhoods and has comprehensive projects for a metropolitan area of over a million people, and links to 50 or more community groups. City governments like Berkeley, California and Portland, Oregon, have sustainable projects to prepare for the energy crisis in economically and environmentally responsible ways, not waiting for top-down corporate-driven solutions.

Though programs support individual and household "green" living and business practices, the broader goals are to develop new economic plans, enhance the "quality of life," and preserve natural and cultural assets for present and future generations. To some degree, these draw on, or even revive, earlier ideals of simplicity, self-reliance, reverence for nature, and cooperation.

Creating a community inventory

To identify opportunities and constraints for relocalization and sustainability, most programs begin with a detailed inventory of the community's economic, ecological and social/cultural/political characteristics, assess the state of the natural and cultural commons, and analyze how basic

needs (food, water, housing, transportation, etc.) are provided. Like a thriving, resilient eco-system, all elements of a community must be functioning and in balance. Big-box stores, like an invasive species, threaten local and regional economies, and a community dependent on tourism is vulnerable to rising energy and gas prices like a single-crop field is to one pest.

Once assets and needs are identified, planning within and among communities can lead to new kinds of cooperation and mutually beneficial projects throughout a region based on principles of localization and sustainability, with particular emphasis on the economy. This cooperation undercuts current development practices driven by corporate business and finance that pit one community against the other and plunder and pollute nature for profit.

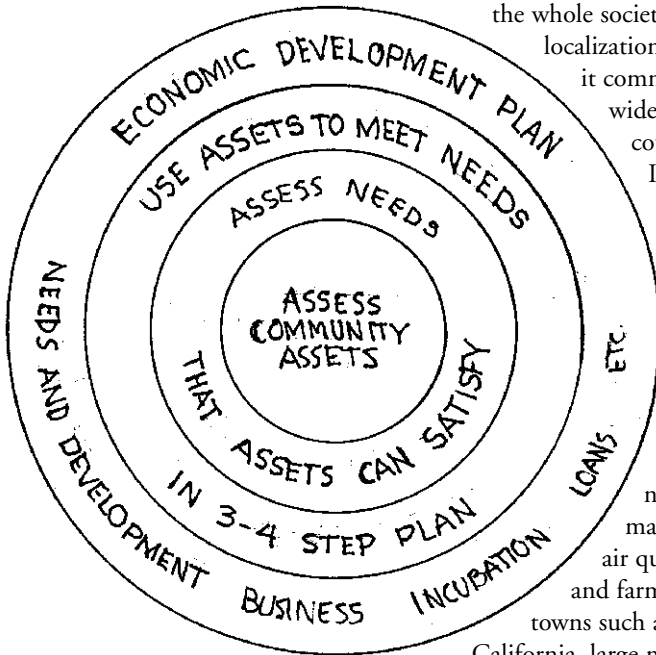
Creating Community—Doing Democracy

The revolutionary potential of relocalization and sustainability movements in the US is seen by how "indigenous peoples" throughout Latin America, oppressed by colonial and national regimes, have through community solidarity and collective action reclaimed their right as a sovereign people to economic, social and environmental justice. They have swept indigenous and populist leaders into national office in eight countries.

In the US, while officials "represent" their wealthy and corporate patrons in the name of democracy, people of place—the root meaning of indigenous—are coming together to re-imagine and re-create the economic and political life of their communities. In the process, they are getting to know each other, share hopes and concerns, agree, disagree and compromise, have fun and enjoy their successes together. In part, this is what Virginia Rasmussen calls "doing Democracy."

The question is: can community programs be carried out in the current regulatory and jurisdictional framework? Will people have to go further in asserting community rights by passing local or county ordinances as many communities have recently done in Pennsylvania, New Hampshire and California? Ultimately, will communities find it necessary to assert that they are not bound by the rules of the undemocratic international trade agreements and the new Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America? Will they make their own restorative economy [and community] that promotes healthy communities and a healthy planet?

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graphic:Kjersten Jeppesen