

Response Memorandum

September 29, 2009

To: Regional Plan Citizen Advisory Committee

From: William P. Ring, Member

Re: "Sustainability" as a separate plan element.
Sustainability as the number one guiding principle.

Summary: Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the suggestion that Sustainability be a plan element and the number one guiding principle for the Regional Plan. I concur with my Committee member that Sustainability be a plan element. I respectfully disagree with the definition of Sustainability being offered and I'd like to offer a definition that is the commonly accepted standard in the literature. Finally, I do not believe Sustainability should be the number one guiding principle over the other laudable principles in the Regional Plan.

1. What is Sustainability? The commonly accepted definition of Sustainability is:

Meeting the needs of the present while also not compromising the ability of future generations to also meet their own needs.¹

The Arizona Indicators project - the source for this definition - goes on to discuss Sustainability in these terms: "A sustainable society works to balance the needs of the economy, the environment and society. This means considering how our use of land, water, energy and atmosphere can protect quality of life, livability and prosperity across all segments of society and for future generations".² The Arizona Indicators speak of balancing the economy with the environment and society in terms of quality of life, livability and prosperity.

The definition offered by my colleague is:

"Sustainability is the ability of a community to meet its needs for energy, water, food, shelter, medicine and other essential elements of human life without fossil fuels and without compromising the integrity of local ecosystems. Sustainability includes economic, social, cultural and ecological resilience".

This definition incorporates many good principles of sustainability, but it also embeds others that suggest a supremacy of certain viewpoints over others and, significantly, does not address the issue of balance or balancing priorities. There is no definition I am aware of that requires a community to meet its essential needs without fossil fuels. I agree that economic, social, cultural

¹Arizona Indicators Project, 411 N. Central Avenue, Suite 900, Phoenix, Arizona 85004; See: www.arizona-indicators.org/pages/sustainability/index.html

²Arizona Indicators, Id.

and ecological systems are resilient and resilience should not be compromised to the point of endangerment. But ecosystems can and will be impinged upon by human activity. What is not intended is that the systems cannot - even through their resilience - recover from human activity. That is when the balance passes the tipping point and the practice becomes unsustainable.

Our definition should speak in terms of balance. It should give human activity and human interaction an equal place along side other ecosystems. And it should not jeopardize human prosperity or endanger the human condition in search of a goal that tilts toward erasing the human footprint from the ecosystem. That is why balance is so necessary to any working definition of Sustainability. After all, we are sustaining human needs here, now and in the future.

My colleague recognizes many of the discussion points in her memorandum, and we are not far apart. We are close. The definition, however, should reflect the commonly accepted terms for sustainable practices.

2. Elements of Sustainability.

There are many elements that can be included in a portfolio of sustainable practices. I fully agree with the comment that sustainability is a widely accepted concept in Flagstaff.

It is also acceptable to speak of elements in terms of economic, environmental, and social practices. While we spend a significant amount of national, state and local effort measuring the economy and environmental conditions, one of the hardest metrics to discern are the social practices.³ Many social concerns relate to denial of access to opportunities such as livable wages and affordable housing, as my colleague suggests. Others attempt to address the health and well-being of people and their institutions (access to health care, satisfaction with local government, etc.).

I suggest that any Sustainability element begin with statements regarding our shared values, and be stated in positive terms such as the things that we cherish or the elements that make us unique; and uniquely Flagstaff. Then I suggest we establish goals and policies that enhance what is best about our social fabric; namely, our people and our institutions. I recommend we avoid use of strident language that speaks in terms of rectifying social injustice. We may, indeed, rectify social injustice by accentuating the positive and seeking to fulfill a positive vision.

3. Sustainability is a shared principle, not a supreme principle.

Again, the key dimensions of Sustainability are three: economic, environmental and social. The chapter/section format of our Regional Plan essentially addresses each of these sub-categories in its own way, and expounds upon sustainable goals, policies and strategies therein. Surprisingly - or not so surprisingly for Flagstaff and this sub-region of Coconino County - the Regional Plan we currently have already "channels" Sustainability through its many finer points. One could even say that Sustainability has worked its way into a supreme principle without the need to call it out

³*Measuring Sustainable Development*, Candice Stephens, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), September, 2005, at p. 5.

separately and say so. It is present in the subtle weave of the Plan already. Its effect is subtle, but powerful. I suggest we let it rest there, in the DNA, without calling attention to it as the number one guiding principle. It doesn't need the extra attention.

As I am saying, first, Sustainability already is supreme. But second, as soon as we enter into debate about the supremacy of this issue we can only work to: (a) turn Sustainability around on itself and dilute its effectiveness elsewhere in the Plan; (b) render other sections less relevant as the Sustainability chapter becomes the supreme filter; and c) alter the balance even within the Sustainability paradigm by making the primary debate about one factor, to the loss of other potentially prosperous factors discussed elsewhere in the Plan that are also sustainable practices.

This, of course, at least suggests that Sustainability not be a separate section. However, I agree with my colleague and believe that Sustainability is a supportable stand-alone proposition. Lets not, however, assign it the greatest importance. Rather, lets have it expound upon what makes Flagstaff's regional fabric so unique and so enjoyable, and seek to sustain and enhance those practices that we seem to undertake already.⁴

⁴I have great praise for the people of Flagstaff. I think we all do. There are small anecdotes and stories about what makes us unique. Here are my few: a) Ever try to merge into traffic at the odd Rte. 66 curve under the train tracks when southbound on Sitgreaves at "I do I do". With a waive people just know to let each other in; b) Ever meet a friendly local on a forest trail? Everyone knows to stop and share a quick hello or conversation; c) Stand in line at Macy's. Its college students, bankers, Rastafarians, lawyers, locals and all sort of people, striking up conversation in line; d) There is very little pretention about what car to drive; and professionals bike to work. Does this address affordable housing and livable wages? No and yes. I believe we will tackle affordable housing and livable wages with the same kindness we show each other every day. It is a matter of leadership, not revolution, which is why the Plan language must be positive, not negative, in my opinion.