



Reconsidering Sustainability in Coastal Georgia

Many people ask what we mean by a “sustainable” coast, or “sustainable development.” Before attempting to define sustainability and explain how it might be used to address problems in coastal Georgia, we first describe what the Center is trying to accomplish by using the sustainable approach.

Rationale for Using Sustainability Analysis and Policies

- ❖ It helps us understand the present situation, the choices available for correcting foreseeable problems, and the consequences of all choices as they affect the future.
- ❖ Being holistic, it forces us to consider how dependent we are on nature, economically and otherwise.
- ❖ Because it is a comprehensive approach, it reveals the problems created by overly fragmented economic development, public health, environmental protection, and other areas of public policy.
- ❖ By showing how current practices contradict their objectives, sustainability analysis assists in getting a more accurate understanding of the costs and as well as the benefits of new approaches.

The basic objective and underlying principle of sustainability is fairly simple: We need to live within the capacity of natural systems. Acknowledging that nature has a finite capacity may seem self-evident, yet the combined effect of our many individual decisions do not reflect our awareness of that maxim.

The original and most widely used formal definition of sustainability came from a United Nations report on environment and economic development in 1987 (***Our Common Future***, by the Brundtland Commission).

Quoting from that report, “We all depend on our biosphere for sustaining our lives. Yet each community, each country,

strives for survival and prosperity with little regard for its impacts on others.” The report went on to call for new approaches to development that meets “the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

By competing for individual advancement without reaching reasonable agreement on the total resource limits and how to allocate them responsibly, humanity is depleting the world’s resources at an accelerating rate. “If environmental scientists are correct... the consequences of not acknowledging material constraints on the economy are scarier than anything the shift to sustainability might imply.” (***Our Ecological Footprint: Reducing Human Impact on the Earth***, The New Catalyst Bioregional Series, 1996)

The last statement may seem like a dramatic claim, but the evidence of its validity is readily apparent even within our own state. Consider water. No one doubts that many of Georgia’s most urgent water resource problems (both quality and supply) are related to excessive development in the Atlanta metropolitan area and other poor judgments imposing unrealistic demands on natural resources. Daily, land use decisions by many local governments continue to add to the mounting difficulty of serving the water needs of a rampantly growing population. [Similar findings apply to air quality and other natural resource issues.]

In the face of overwhelming evidence of adverse consequences*, the individual decisions of cities and counties in that sprawling urbanization are marching us relentlessly off the edge of a cliff. The cliff we’re approaching is the gradual destruction of our watersheds, five of which are vital to the coast for both water supply and nature-based jobs, not to mention our quality of life.

[*Evidence includes: Water supply conflicts and water quality problems; traffic congestion, travel costs, and driving fatalities; air quality and increasing respiratory illness, especially among children and infants; contamination of fish, shellfish, and other foods.]

Among those in positions to decide how water is used, or to influence those who do, are people who still argue that

this growth is inherently good, and who therefore seek to promote it at all costs. But exactly what is growth good for? Typically, the answer is “economic development,” “job creation,” and, of course, “pursuit of property rights.” But how much private gain can be made at the expense of public resources, and how do we determine the limits? It is crucial that we answer these questions.

Lacking a larger perspective, many decision makers take too little account of the interests of other groups (current or future) in demanding that their own constituents’ needs are met. What’s most troubling, in our efforts to appease conventionally defined economic interests, few bold steps are taken to lead policy in a more responsible direction. Thus, there is a self-destructive disconnection between the perceived self-interest of short-term thinking and the long-term, ecosystem-level impacts of our actions. This is where sustainability comes in, and exactly the circumstances that led to the concept being advocated.

“The time has come to readjust our decision-making methods, and the sooner we do it, the less costly it will be.”

Sustainable policies would require assessment of (1) the capacity and condition of essential natural systems, (2) the needs of all users relying on those systems, and (3) alternative options for making these uses more efficient before access is granted to any additional resources in support of growth. And sustainability would serve to integrate economic and community development programs with goals for health and environmental protection. Without this comprehensive approach, further mistakes cannot be avoided. But to use it, we must confront conventional thinking, which is often narrowly short sighted.

For instance, property rights are stridently used as the basis for objecting to any policy that constrains the ‘highest and best use’ of land. The beguiling simplicity of that argument and its highly emotional ties to our frontier past are also its fatal flaw, proven in numerous legal actions. When growth reaches a certain point, it is no longer possible for one person’s property rights to be pursued limitlessly without hurting the rights of others. That’s what led to adoption of zoning in the ‘20’s, environmental laws in the ‘70’s, and the current push toward merging the multiple objectives of economic, health, and environmental programs through policies of sustainability.

Obsolete and commonly misinterpreted notions of property rights are among the most entrenched justifications for individual decisions that work against our common interests.

Respect for property rights does not have to be equated with blind adherence to market forces, especially when those forces lead us in the wrong direction.

As times change, we must reexamine the rules that prescribe these trade-offs, and now is one of those times.

“Property rights, like all rights, carry with them a set of trade-offs, offering privileges in exchange for responsibilities. Without proper definition and enforcement of responsibilities, and limits on privileges, there can be no system of rights with lasting benefit to society.”

Georgia’s rampant growth can no longer be viewed as unconditional prosperity. Nor can locally-driven agendas to compete against other communities or states be validated by accommodating their selfish demands for natural resources, which in one way or another adversely affects other Georgians. Even more to the point, we cannot continue using our public resources to support antiquated notions of development, which gains benefits for the few at the expense of the many – sometimes even within the same city or county. [Case in point - Hercules Air Permit - see article in this issue.]

We must use the logic and information-handling capacity at our disposal to reach decisions that reflect true public interest. Among other things, this will mean more deliberative, thorough decision processes, supported by better information about our natural resources that will help determine the sustainability of choices available and how to reach them.

Environmental research, monitoring, and assessment will be the key to our future success. But for this key to work, we must adapt and integrate all major policies to conform to the principle of sustainability. Until we make this reform, we can expect every solution to produce its own new problems. Piecemeal decisions governing the use of land, air, and water will continue to generate benefits for some at the expense of others. Further, decisions made without reliable understanding of impacts will bring increasing risk.

Sustainability seeks to stem that trend by improving the accountability of our decisions using more complete information to unify the objectives of individuals (voters, employers, property owners, and industries) with those of society, represented by government at all levels. Our future depends on revised approaches that are more realistic and responsible. One of the keys to achieving that will be the adoption and consistent use of sustainability policies.