

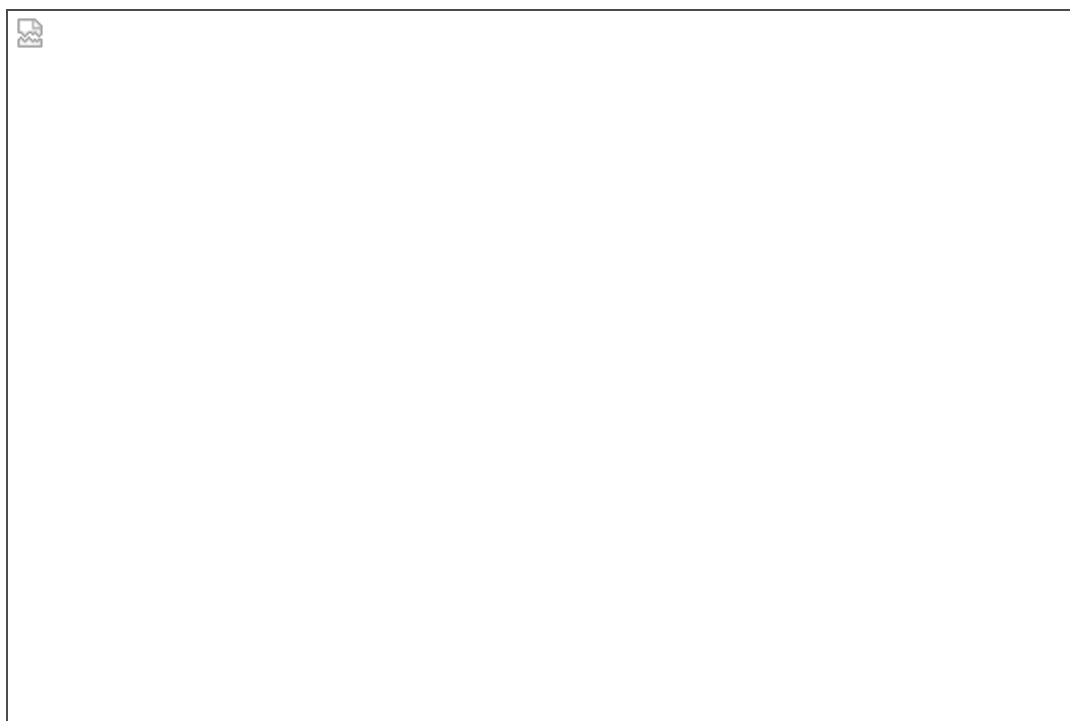
ENVIRONMENT, GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT, POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

Speak Your Piece: The Future of Urban and Rural America are Linked

History tells us that in economic downturns, rural areas suffer tremendously. Can we make this time different?

by **Timothy Collins**

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Downtown Rochelle, Illinois.

Photo: Jim Frazier

The world's current economic mess — and an impending stimulus plan from the federal government — highlights the urgent need for rural sustainability.

Note that I am not using the term sustainable rural development.

Rural sustainability is rooted in a good quality of life that respects the landscape and the fruits of the land. It is a conscious effort to build relationships between people and the land that respect the environment as a trust held for future generations. Lives on the land are shared and managed to respect the carrying capacity of the land for the local community and for the global society.

Sustainability is a tough sell, mainly because it's so hard to define. My individual sustainability may not be the same as your individual sustainability. Sustaining a city might involve trashing the distant countryside, while building a seemingly high standard of living for a lot of urban and suburban residents. That is the old way of doing things, and it has been detrimental to people, places, and the economy both in rural and urban areas.

Rural and urban sustainability are not exactly the same because of their different environments. Yet, they are inextricably linked:

Rural sustainability involves open country with a built infrastructure designed to access the products of the land. This use is carefully managed for local, regional, and global consumption. At the same time, the use involves conserving and enhancing that environment.

Urban areas are built up and are intensive resource users that draw on the countryside to create their own local and global wealth. Urban areas not only must monitor their use, but they need to contribute to efforts to build rural sustainability.

Rural and urban sustainability are intertwined. They both demand respect for the natural environment that borrows and then repays so that future generations will be secure.

There is currently no such thing as a sustainable city, although many cities are trying to be more sustainable. Cities can never be sustainable until the rural areas that provide them with natural resources and labor are sustainable.

The times we are living in offer a historic chance to work on rural sustainability now. Issues of energy, food production, water quality, telecommunications, and a host of other problems are ever-present challenges.

Rural sustainability is built on healthy communities. Community is more than the people in a place. As conservationist Aldo Leopold pointed out in the 1940s, the community also includes the soil, water, plants, and animals. Leopold rightly claimed that humans are responsible for taking care of the land in ways that do not destroy the environment, and, in fact, need to make the local environment their first consideration in decision making.

From a policy perspective, rural sustainability includes land use planning that maximizes environmental protection and repair of past damage as prerequisites for any development decisions. These decisions must at minimum offset additional environmental damage. Optimally, they include efforts to restore what has been damaged. There is precedence for this approach if we heed examples of state and federal land reclamation following the Dustbowl of the 1930s or reforestation of places where timber was mowed down rapaciously.

Rural sustainability is a dynamic process that leads toward better lives and better communities. While we're putting together an economic stimulus package, now is a perfect time to list what a sustainable rural program would do:

It would increase the capacity of people to understand their relationships with the land and its future value.

It would view all land as a commonwealth; land use decisions would be based on stewardship for future generations, not only present needs.

Such a program would balance property rights with the responsibilities property ownership entails. Property owners would recognize that they are obligated to be caretakers for those who will use the land later on.

It would overcome immediate self-interest to formulate long-term consensus on continuing common interests of the entire community.

It would encourage a basic built infrastructure that respects the landscape and complements the community's natural features.

A sustainable rural program would be inclusive, fair, and just. It would counter the negative impacts of being left behind in a global economy.

It would offer a full and accurate accounting of the cumulative impacts of current and future development ““ positive or negative ““ on the land community.

It would foster workers and business owners who are skilled in making decisions that have positive impacts

on the whole community, including the land.

It would use the highest levels of energy efficiency and renewable energy wherever possible.

Finally, a sustainable rural stimulus plan would engage children and adults in a lifelong education process that focuses on the community while recognizing the advantages and disadvantages of being part of the rapidly changing world.

Rural sustainability is not necessarily about economic and population growth, although these can be important in communities where the carrying capacity of the land will allow it. It is all about changes made within and around people's lives. We all have direct or indirect interest in rural areas whether we are individuals, families, organizations, businesses, communities, and different levels of government worldwide.

The move toward rural sustainability faces significant obstacles. As Walt Kelly observed in his comic strip, Pogo, a half century ago: "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

Yet, there is plenty of room for optimism. We have a history of conservation and environmentalism that can be the basis for creating rural sustainability, even in the face of human frailties and tough economic times.

The outcomes of our current economic decline are as yet uncertain. Based on history, rural communities will suffer tremendously as commodity prices fall, farms falter, businesses close, and tax revenues shrink. Could the current downturn end up being worse for rural areas than the farm crisis of the 1980s? Time will tell.

We do know that the nation is in the midst of a serious economic crisis, and there is already movement afoot to stimulate the economy. Rural America has special needs. During the Depression of the 1930s, the federal government invested in programs to rebuild rural America. Before conditions erode further, we would do well to develop policies and activities to move toward rural sustainability, including lifelong educational opportunities and creating green jobs, businesses, and physical infrastructure.

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