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A Green Plan for the Bay Area

facing page: **Planning together. The *Blueprint* emphasizes the importance of planning efforts that give everyone a reason to participate. Individuals, community groups and city planners can create a vision for their community and can work together to make it happen.**
Photo: **Urban Ecology**

Having recently reviewed a good deal of the literature on sustainable development and local planning initiatives from the past several years, I can say that the *Blueprint for a Sustainable Bay Area* is truly a unique and very special document. There are several reasons for this distinction, the most notable of which are: Urban Ecology's decision to create the *Blueprint* in the first place, the inclusionary process used to develop the document, its overall readability and visual quality, and the scope of the outreach efforts now being undertaken to disseminate the *Blueprint's* message.

Urban Ecology first began thinking about developing a document on sustainability in 1992. By that time most people had begun to accept the 1987 Bruntdland Report's definition of sustainability as "development that meets the needs of those present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." This concept had spawned many works on sustainable buildings, neighborhoods and development. But nobody had looked closely at how to link a successive hierarchy of places, including both the built and the natural environments, starting with the home
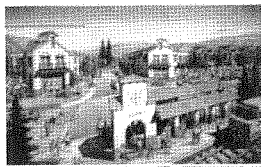
and moving through the neighborhood, the community, up to the regional level, into a construct of sustainability that worked at multiple levels simultaneously. The initial intent of *Blueprint* was to create a plan that could look at each of these levels of development in relation to each other, and to seek a proactive approach to future development while still acknowledging the importance of environmental protection.

Having defined such an ambitious mission, Urban Ecology realized that if it developed a plan based merely on the vision of a few people, the ideas would, by definition, be limited, and the message would lack power, convictions or new insights. Instead, the group organized ten Vision Forums focusing on each level of the *Blueprint* (home, neighborhood, regions, etc.). Each forum took a slightly different form, ranging from lectures and panel discussions to walking tours and boat rides; however, every Forum had two parts: imparting information and creating a synthesis of new ideas based on what people had learned. The results of this exercise are both the broad principles articulated in the beginning of the *Blueprint* and the individual recommendations for action.

These recommended actions are really the core of the book. As one reads through each chapter, they are like pearls of wisdom strung together by a strong thread of coherent and cohesive narrative. It is probably no accident that visual analogies work well to describe the *Blueprint*, because it is a very visual book. Every page is designed to be very readable in several levels. For the reader with little time, there are sufficient signposts and guidelines to be able to skim quickly through the information and pick out the key salient points; on the other hand, for someone with more time, there is considerable depth of material.

Blueprint's superb readability is one of its greatest strengths. This book is targeted to many different audiences from the lay public to local elected officials. It is likely that most of these readers do not have masters degrees in planning, and many have only an intuitive or emotional attachment to the concepts of sustainability based on wanting to do very general good things, like protecting the environment, or cutting back on traffic congestion. These people need a starting point where

Topic

Sidebar or Information Tidbit

Discussion

Example

Case Study Photo

Quote

Case Study Description

Color bar indicates "sustainable" alternative

Specific Recommendations

Sustainable Example

What you can do

Case Study Description

Case Study Photo

they can begin to educate themselves about the problems we are facing and some of the real options they have to start moving towards meaningful solutions.

This is especially true for local elected officials, who often have to make decisions about future development in the face of opposition from people wanting to stop or minimize growth. While environmental protection is often used as the justification for blocking growth, there are many instances in which this resistance is as much or more about a dislike of change than it is about the environment. Typically, the elected officials lack a solid vision for the future on which they can base any decision as to whether the change will be good or bad for the community, and their professional staffs tend to get bogged down with trying to analyze variables that may link to the ostensible reasons people are protesting growth, but are not relevant to people's real concerns.

As a result, decisions are reached at an ad hoc manner, with no real or comprehensive understanding of how the future is truly being impacted. The *Blueprint* begins to address this problem by providing both a vision and technical information that shows how to create policy that is linked to a vision. This approach is more proactive than traditional growth management strategies, and allows communities to be smarter about their future, even if they have less control over growth than they would like.

Urban Ecology has been able to reach thousands of people with both the *Blueprint* itself, and with the approximately one-hundred talks on the *Blueprint* that were given all over the Bay Area in the first year after its publication. This educational process is a critical first step in making any real changes in the way we think about our communities as they evolve. Over the coming years, the *Blueprint* will hopefully continue to provide a framework that allows people with diverse perspectives to identify their common areas of interest and begin to take concrete steps towards finding a more sustainable future for us all.

Early in the book, the structure of the *Blueprint* is explained to provide maximum clarity. This is one example of how the *Blueprint* assures a high level of accessibility.