

## THE IDEA OF THE COUNTRYSIDE

The topic posed for this paper, written on the occasion of the International Countryside Stewardship Exchange program in Ontario, is "The Idea of the Countryside." The author is American, with modest knowledge of Canada and the United Kingdom, and that perspective permeates the discussion that follows. Comments and responses from readers - particularly those from other countries - would be most welcome. Contrast often generates insight into the familiar - and this has always been a special and valuable benefit of the Exchange program.

At its core, our idea of the countryside is probably most firmly determined by what it isn't - it is the antithesis of (and the perceived antidote to) the city and stands in pastoral contrast to the wilderness. In our mind's eye, the city is noisy, dirty, crowded, chaotic, complex. The countryside is natural, healthy, sparsely populated, changeless, simple. Of course this idea of the countryside denies reality. The agricultural landscapes at the heart of our idea of the countryside are working landscapes, created and maintained by people. The countryside contains towns as well, which are often in tension with the agricultural landscape. It is a dynamic landscape and as full of complexities as any urban area.

It is the great irony that the countryside cannot be considered in isolation from nearby urban areas. Each must be healthy or neither will be. The cities must be safe, vibrant places to live or those who can will continue to flee and seek their idealized version of the better life in the countryside. The sprawl and increased property values resulting from that flight will eat away at the quality of life the newcomers seek and long-time residents treasure.

But what then provides the basis for a healthy countryside? People. People living and working in effective communities. People with the knowledge, will, and social and governmental structures necessary to manage human, cultural and natural resources in a sustainable way.

During this Exchange, team members will be challenged to evaluate the communities with which they will work, to analyze their strengths and weaknesses, and to assess threats to their future as well as identify opportunities. To help them do this, we suggest that they consider several elements that we have identified as being essential to sustainable communities:

- a vibrant civic infrastructure;
- a strong information base;
- a shared vision;
- the ability to apply tools and techniques effectively; and
- the ability to relate to the world effectively.

These elements relate to the way in which the community functions; to evaluate them the team must go beyond the mere assessment of cultural and natural resources. We recognize that there are many ways to analyze communities, but ask the teams to use these to facilitate comparisons among the communities which are hosting teams. (We will also ask team members to recommend ways in which these elements can be refined or revised.)

One danger in identifying and focusing on particular elements is that it may pull our focus away from the critical interrelationships among them. Therefore the discussion that follows will introduce the

elements and suggest the importance of the interconnections.

Communities may be viewed as complex adaptive systems - systems composed of many constituent parts that can adapt to changing situations and environments. Murray Gell-Mann, Nobel Laureate in Physics, posits that the success of complex adaptive systems depends upon the connectivity within them, the connectivity that facilitates the flow of information from which develops a shared understanding of how the system can operate in a way that benefits all of its constituent parts, that allows effective change. It is this connectivity to which we must be alert. For it is only when a community has a strong civic infrastructure that it has the ability to effectively use information and available tools and techniques to develop and achieve a shared vision, which, coupled with an ability to relate to the larger world, will allow it to achieve the future it desires.

### **Civic Infrastructure**

Robert Putnam has played a leading role in articulating the importance of civic infrastructure or civic capacity. In *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, his now-classic study, Putnam sought to determine why Italy's effort to regionalize government worked well in some regions and not others. He concluded that it was civic capacity - "the social ability to collaborate for a shared interest." Putnam later shifted his focus to the United States and in a dead-serious paper with the colorful title "Bowling Alone" he expressed concern about the steep drop in participation in the group activities that once characterized much of American life and provided experience in working with diverse people with varied interests, and the opportunity to develop leadership skills.

Assessment of a community's civic capacity may involve many factors, including:

- the richness and diversity of public and private organizations with overlapping memberships that provide opportunities for social intercourse and leadership development; and
- the presence of a diverse group of skilled, effective leaders who collaborate on social, economic and other issues that the community must address.

A more general, but no less important, concern is the predominance of what Daniel Kemmis, mayor of Missoula, Montana, calls the "old-fashioned civic virtues of trust, honesty, justice toleration, cooperation, hope and remembrance," rather than cynicism and despair.

### **Knowledge Base**

For a community to have a chance for long-term success, it must have a clear, reasonable understanding of its natural, cultural and human resources. Inventories of these resources must be developed, kept current, and made generally available. Geographic information systems (GIS) technology, which is becoming more generally available, facilitates understanding the interrelationships among the communities' resources and applying this understanding to decision-making. Planning from an understanding of the community's distinctive mix of resources can provide an edge in an increasingly competitive economic future. A community with a distinctive character has an advantage in attracting and retaining its residents and businesses, including tourism.

The community must also understand how its current planning and zoning will influence its future. We must heed the old adage: "If you are not careful, you will get where you are going." Surprisingly, many communities have never considered the impact of the full "build out" allowed by their current zoning. And as we have recently become painfully aware, the zoning and subdivision ordinances of most jurisdictions do not allow the creation of the village centers that facilitate the personal interactions necessary to a healthy community.

### **Vision of the Community's Future**

Many communities have assumed that all they need to prepare for the future is a master plan and zoning ordinance that guides the community's physical development. But to be successful, a community must have a comprehensive vision of its future, one that encompasses social and economic factors as well as physical ones. It must consider economic development, housing,

recreation, education, in short, all of the factors that combine to determine the quality of life. If the community is to have any chance of working toward its vision effectively, the vision must be developed through the involvement of people representing all interests within the community. The plan itself should embody the articulation of their shared values. It is hard work, and the task is never finally completed - there must be a means for continually reevaluating and updating the vision as circumstances change.

### **Tools and Techniques**

Over the past twenty or thirty years we have developed a myriad of tools and techniques relating to land use and economic development - some regulatory, some incentive-based. Therefore it is instructive to determine which tools and techniques - both public and private - any given community has come to understand and use. Key among them may be the following:

- policies and procedures to deal realistically and fairly with community growth; a growth management system to deal with the impacts - good and bad - of growth or decline;
- a land trust or a relationship with a private land conservation organization to assure good relationships with property owners and the long-term conservation and management of special properties, including natural systems, recreational land and historic resources;
- the means of encouraging sustainable economic development through support for individual opportunities and creation of community-wide programs; and
- continuing education for involved citizens and community leaders, both public and private, so that their knowledge of available tools and techniques and their understanding of the world will remain current.

### **Ability to Deal with the Larger World**

Just as the community's strength is determined by the connectivity within its borders, so its future will be impacted by its connectivity with the larger world. It must have the ability on both a public and private basis to be knowledgeable about and involved in issues of regional, national and even international concern. This ability may be both public and private, formal or informal. Exchange team members may find the following questions helpful in this inquiry:

- do community leaders participate in organizations and activities that operate on a scale that extends beyond the community?;
- does local government cooperate in and support appropriate forms of regional governance?; and
- do local leaders continually scan the horizon for change that may affect the community and work with colleagues from outside the community to pursue and protect their common interests?

We believe that the elements called out above are some of those essential for sustainable communities. We also believe, however, that care must be taken to understand the unique interaction of people, culture and place that has shaped - and will continue to shape - each community.

In *Community and the Politics of Place*, Daniel Kemmis, suggests that

Places have a way of claiming people. When they claim very diverse kinds of people, then those people must eventually learn to live with each other; they must learn to inhabit their place together, which they can only do through the development of certain practices of inhabitation which both rely upon and nurture the old-fashioned civic virtues of trust, honesty, justice, toleration, cooperation, hope, and remembrance. It is through the nurturing of such virtues (and in no other way) that we might begin to reclaim that competency upon which democratic citizenship depends.

The quality of democratic citizenship will, in turn, determine the fate of the countryside. The Exchange has a valuable contribution to make in this regard. It serves as a catalyst for the development and enhancement of civic capacity. While working with several communities within a region, it is locally-based, with each community defining the issues on which it will focus. Before the team arrives, each community develops a broad-based coalition that shares the community's many responsibilities during the team's stay. This coalition's work before, during and after the Exchange visit, contributes to the enrichment of the civic capacity, and the civic virtues, that will allow the community effectively to define and protect its idea of the countryside.

Judith M. LaBelle, Esq.  
President  
Countryside Institute/Glynwood Center