Sustainable Development: Prosperity Without Growth

— Chapter One *Economic Renewal Guide*

The assumption that economic prosperity requires growth seems so reasonable that most of us don't think much about it. After all, it's what we've always been told; politicians, business boosters, economists, and the media all seem to take it for granted. The assumption is so pervasive that virtually every American community is looking for ways to grow out of its economic problems, even when those problems are themselves the result of growth.

The trouble is, the word "growth" has two fundamentally different meanings: "expansion" and "development." Expansion means getting bigger; development means getting better, which may or may not involve expansion. This is no mere semantic distinction. Many communities have wasted a lot of time and energy pursuing expansion because that's what they thought they needed, when what they really needed was development. To avoid confusion, let's define growth here only as getting bigger—expansion—and development as getting better.

Though a sound economy requires development, including vigorous business activity, it doesn't necessarily require expansion of community size. An analogy can be made with the human body. Human growth after maturity is cancer. When a town continues to expand after maturity, its cancer becomes manifest in many ways: spiteful controversy, higher taxes, traffic, sprawl, lost sense of community. Sound familiar?

But after reaching physical maturity, humans continue to develop in many beneficial and interesting ways: learning new skills, gaining deeper wisdom, cultivating new relationships, and so on. Similarly, a community can develop itself without necessarily expanding. It can create affordable housing, protect public safety, and improve employment, health, cultural, and educational opportunities. In fact, a good definition of development is the creation of jobs, income, savings, and a stronger community.

This is not to say that all expansion is bad, but it's essential to distinguish it from development in order to make choices that truly benefit the community.

Looking for Growth in All the Wrong Places

Chances are your town's current economic strategy is based on the expansion sort of growth. If your town is booming, the strategy probably involves riding the growth for all it's worth. If it's declining economically, the solution typically proposed will be some sort of business recruitment to stimulate growth. In either case, local boosters may use the words "growth" or "development," but what they really mean is "expansion": more people, more businesses, more commercial and retail space. The emphasis is on getting more, instead of on doing better with what the town has already got.

Sometimes, at least in the short term, doing better requires getting more. But a community that limits its development efforts to finding new business is missing opportunities and squandering local potential.

Declining communities and expanding communities face different sets of challenges, but one thing they often have in common is an overreliance on expansion. Let's look at this in more detail.

Declining Communities

Business failures, loss of jobs and population, lack of opportunities for young people, deteriorating infrastructure, loss of hope…these are some of the daunting problems of a declining community. The local economy is probably based on one or two salable resources such as timber, coal, wheat, or a manufactured product. Such communities may seem prosperous until the international economy makes a slight “adjustment” and their products are no longer worth more than the cost of production.

When a community’s basic industry is threatened, the usual response is to call for economic development—any economic development. Local government officials come under intense pressure to do *something*. Residents want to see action. Traditionally this translates into a single, cure-all strategy: business recruitment, which, when pursued indiscriminately, can be termed smokestack-chasing. Chambers of commerce and development groups across the country commonly fall victim to the siren song of business recruitment.

If communities knew the odds they were facing, they would broaden their approach. Each year some 25,000 economic development committees from large and small cities bid for about 500 major plant sitings—a 50-to-1 ratio. To stay in the running, they must give away land, infrastructure, and tax breaks, or offer special exemptions from regulations. It’s not uncommon for a competing government to offer an incentive package worth millions of dollars and still lose the bid. To land a new Mercedes assembly plant in 1993, the state of Alabama offered a record $200,000 worth of incentives *per job created*. Though lesser amounts are offered to smaller firms, very few towns or neighborhoods can play in this high-stakes league.

If a community does manage to bring in a major new business, the reality rarely matches the expectations. Often, promised jobs simply don’t materialize. If jobs are created, they may last only a few years until the industry is offered an even bigger giveaway somewhere else, leaving behind unemployed workers and a precarious tax base. Meanwhile, incentives become a community tar baby as existing local businesses begin to demand similar breaks to remain in the community. Eventually, the hidden costs of incentive packages come home to roost, forcing officials to choose between higher taxes and reduced public services.

Gambling and “big-box” retail, the latest business-recruitment fads, present their own pitfalls. Casinos generate encouraging sales tax revenues but also huge demands on local infrastructure and services—especially police services. Big-box retailers typically locate just outside town boundaries to avoid municipal taxes. Local businesses are quickly squeezed out by the superstore. Downtown windows are boarded up and trash piles up in doorways where, broom in hand, shopkeepers once greeted long-time customers with a friendly smile.

Whether it chases smokestacks or superstores, a community pays another price that is impossible to measure: lost opportunities. By the time residents realize they’ve squandered precious time and money on inappropriate recruitment efforts, years may have been lost—years when the community could have been pursuing more practical and sustainable development options.

Instead of doing the wrong thing, some declining towns, paralyzed by a community-wide bad attitude, do nothing at all to strengthen their economies. One town may be in denial about a plant closure: “They’ll change their minds,” residents say, or, “The economy is sure to turn around.” Another may have realized there’s a problem, but is focusing all its energy on blaming those who it believes caused the problem: the government, the company, environmentalists. Both these towns will continue to decline until they realize that revitalization can begin only when inhabitants decide to take positive action—the kinds of actions described in this book.

Rapidly Expanding Communities

A rush of new economic activity can be as harmful as a decline. Some towns near a valuable natural resource suddenly become boomtowns through no effort of their own. This can seem like a good thing, but all too often booms are followed by busts: a raw material or product may be in demand one year but out of favor the next. Worse, demand for the resource, and the profits to be made from its extraction, may encourage those in the industry to exploit it for short-term gain. Many logging and farming communities have learned to their cost that even “renewable” resources like trees and soil can be depleted more rapidly than they're being renewed, undermining their long-term basis for prosperity.

Elsewhere, quality of life fuels the expansion. They have clean air and water, little traffic, and low crime. They feel a lot more like home than many cities. These "high-amenity" places may be resort towns or communities that are attractive to retirees and second-home buyers. They may be desirable suburbs within commuting distance of a city, or more isolated communities that attract the new wave of information businesses and individuals who do their work by telephone, fax, and modem, and therefore can live and work wherever they like.

Freed by new technologies, the number of Americans seeking a safer, less complex existence is on the rise. According to Joel Kotkin of the Pacific Research Institute, "After losing population for decades, rural areas are now adding people at three times their 1980s growth rate. Between 1990 and 1994, more than 1.1 million net migrants moved into rural areas." Kotkin calls this the "Valhalla syndrome" because migrants are "yearning for a heavenly retreat."

Whatever the cause of the influx, rapid expansion—more than about a 2-percent annual increase in population—generally brings more harm than good. Communities can't seem to keep ahead of problems created by expansion in excess of this rate. Before one problem can be defined and solved, another arises, then another. They pile up and complicate one another. Local leaders are overwhelmed.

Virtually every fast-expanding town plays out an unpleasant scenario. Townspeople accept almost any new proposal for expansion because they think it will maintain a healthy economy. More people move into the area and things look pretty good. But then the side effects begin to hit home. Newcomers often take the newly created jobs and bring increasing crime, social stress, and higher housing costs. Clean air turns gray, traffic slows and snarls, parking becomes impossible, doors must be locked. Intolerance increases and respect for traditional leadership declines. In the case of high-amenity communities, traditional income sources—tourists, second-home owners, retirees who cherished the small-town character and clean environment—begin to look for the next unspoiled paradise.

As with any inflationary economy, rapid expansion results in a few winners and many losers. Many real estate professionals, big builders, heavy-equipment owners, retail property owners, and large landowners do very well; most others are caught in a spiral of inflation. But expansion is seductive. The winners are very good at convincing the losers that they just need more expansion to be winners, and reassuring them that new taxes from expansion will pay for the solutions to expansion's problems. And indeed, no matter how serious the problems, each increment of expansion has attractive aspects that obscure the long-term downside.

But almost invariably, the problems only worsen while taxes increase to pay for the solutions (more schools, police, fire, roads, human services, sewers, etc.). New revenues seldom cover the true costs of expansion (which include such things as the replacement or expansion of capital facilities). Since the excess costs are spread among all taxpayers, existing taxpayers unwittingly subsidize the expansion—in effect, the losers subsidize the winners. Worse, in many communities that are experiencing sudden second-home expansion, existing taxpayers are subsidizing the well-to-do.

Having bought into the growth premise, local government, businesses, and individuals all find themselves locked into a vicious circle. Local government is forced to finance past expansion by authorizing still more expansion, which will in turn also fail to pay for itself, but on an even larger scale. If officials instead raise taxes, more residents are likely to join the chorus for growth, believing that it will relieve their tax burden. By this point the expansion has acquired its own momentum, because even a slight slowdown can cause serious fiscal crisis.

Business owners, for their part, naturally see community growth as a fast track to higher profits. It may work out that way for some, but for others—particularly retailers—expansion attracts not only more customers but also more competitors and an upward spiral of costs: higher rents, taxes, and wages. Cash flows faster out of business people's hands. Formerly relaxed and friendly businesses become tense and frenzied. "Gone fishin'" signs fade into memory.

Similarly, many individuals support expansion, assuming it will result in more and better jobs. More, yes; better, maybe; but it will also attract more workers, which will maintain competition for jobs. Wages will increase, but probably not as fast as the cost of housing and other essentials. Residents may well find they have to work even harder just to make ends meet. Yet even though many business owners and workers are worse off than before the town expanded, they don't understand why and they call for more expansion to solve their problems.

Comfortable towns seldom turn into teeming cities overnight. Rapid expansion occurs in small increments, each seemingly benign, many arguably beneficial. Cumulatively, however, the vast majority of citizens don't benefit from rapid expansion. Many communities are beginning to examine more carefully each new expansion-generating proposal to determine if benefits outweigh side effects. But most just keep stumbling down the path of rapid expansion without looking where they're going.

Slowly Expanding Communities

Given the problems of declining and rapidly expanding communities, you might conclude that the best strategy is to chart a course somewhere between these two extremes. But while slow expansion does offer a happy medium in many respects, it is no silver bullet. A community will face most of the same problems whether it expands rapidly or slowly—the key difference being that with slow expansion, the community will have more time to address them.

However, no matter how gradually it proceeds, expansion cannot continue indefinitely. By definition, a constant rate of expansion is exponential: a mere 2-percent annual expansion rate results in a quadrupling of size in just 70 years. Sooner or later—usually sooner than we think—an expanding town, country, or species will reach the limits of its space and resources. Island residents tend to be acutely aware of these limits, but the basic principle is the same for people living on the mainland, too: the number of people, buildings, roads, etc. cannot continue increasing forever.

As it approaches its physical limits, even a slowly expanding community will experience the problems of rapidly expanding communities. When there's no more room to build residences inexpensively, for example, housing prices will quickly increase; when conventional means of acquiring water have been exhausted, expensive means will have to be employed.

And though slow expansion theoretically allows a community more time to understand and cope with problems before they become acute, as a practical matter, most communities don't begin to confront problems until they become crises. However, when a community has learned to work together using a process such as the one described in this book, it will be better able to anticipate, confront, and manage expansion problems.

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Exponential Growth

We've accommodated our increasing human population by using more resources and producing more wastes, counting on the planet to provide whatever we want and absorb whatever we discard. Each of these factors—population, resource use, and pollution—has been growing exponentially. The annual rates at which these factors are growing might sound trifling, yet the nature of exponential growth is that it compounds, like interest. Each year, the number increases by a greater amount than the year before.

When problems grow exponentially, you don't get much reaction time; they sneak up on you. Imagine a pond with a few water lilies on its surface that are doubling in number every day. Suppose it takes 30 days for the water lilies to cover the pond. On which day will they cover half the pond? Answer: the 29th day—on the 30th day they'll double again and cover the entire pond. In other words, exponential growth may not seem like a problem for a long time, then suddenly it's a major problem.

In much the same way, our global resource use is growing at about 5.5 percent each year—which means it's doubling every 13 years. If that trend continues, in 2022 the human race will be consuming four times the resources it consumed in 1996.

What's your community's annual growth rate? How long will it take to double? How long will it be before it's four times as big?

Adapted from the newsletter of the Northwest Area Foundation (January 1996).

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The Viable Alternative: Sustainable Development

A growing number of communities are discovering that there's an alternative to economic "development" strategies based on expansion. They're embracing sustainable development, a more balanced approach that weighs social and environmental considerations alongside conventional economic ones. Expanding towns need not give up prosperity as they slow their expansion. Communities with little prospect for expansion need not give up their dreams. There are plenty of development options that don't require expansion.

The term "sustainable development" would be doomed to the scrap heap of short-lived and overused buzzwords were it not rooted in a traditional value, stewardship—the careful, economical, long-term management of land, community, and resources. It's a value that some towns have recently let fall by the wayside. But it's alive and well in many others, even if they don't notice it. People who care deeply about their community and who think conscientiously about the long-term implications of their actions are working for sustainability and stewardship, whether or not they use those words.

When placed in front of the word "development," the word "sustainable" offers both opportunities and constraints. It offers opportunities because its new perspective reveals development options that previously weren't obvious. Many such opportunities are described in the second chapter of RMI's *Economic Renewal Guide*. It offers constraints because, when proposals are considered in light of their long-term effects, some options that might otherwise appear attractive are seen to be unworkable, or not worth their negative effects.

Taking a long-term perspective isn't easy. For instance, it takes guts to turn down a big-box retailer, knowing that you're also saying "no" to lower prices for some products. But a few communities have done just that—because they understood that, in the long run, the local retailers would be better able to survive, keep their profits in the community, and keep their employees working. These towns have said "yes" to the long-term viability of the overall community.

They chose one form of sustainability. Your choices may be quite different. There's no standard way to achieve sustainable development. Every community's situation is unique. Perhaps more important is that there is no point at which a community arrives at sustainability—it's a goal, a moving target that requires a community to continually learn about itself, its external influences, and emerging opportunities.

The following interrelated guidelines will help any community move affirmatively toward sustainability. Not every guideline will be applicable everywhere.

Use Renewable Resources No Faster Than They Can Be Renewed

A timber town will be able to log indefinitely if it cuts timber no faster than the forest can regenerate. A farm town can remain viable only if farmers add nutrients to replace those removed by wind, water, and harvest (and only if the nutrients don't irreversibly pollute area water supplies).

Renewable natural resources—timber, soil, quality of life, etc.—are the chief capital assets of many communities. Unsustainable communities spend these capital assets as if they were income. That's how a retail business is liquidated: tables, counters, and cash registers are sold to pay the bills. When natural resources are spent like income, the economy operates like a business in liquidation, leaving nothing for future generations.

In the business world, there are often economic incentives to operate this way. For example, if the CEO of a large timber corporation is forced to choose between clearcutting a forest to make a 15-percent profit or harvesting it sustainably to make only 9 percent, he's likely to choose the short-term profit from clearcutting and then move the corporation on to another forest, or even another business. Oil, mineral, grain, and other large resource-extraction industries are similarly driven by the quest for short-term return. A community whose economy is based on natural resources may find it extremely difficult to resist these corporate pressures to spend down its precious capital. Yet in the long term it can't afford not to: the corporation can always move on to the next forest, but the community can't.

Use Non-Renewable Resources Understanding that Someday a Renewable Substitute Will Be Required

Activities such as mining and oil drilling aren't necessarily wrong or harmful, but the fact is that they deplete finite resources. Someday the silver, oil, and coal will run out (if the market doesn't make them uneconomic first).

All towns based on the extraction of non-renewable resources must eventually find another basis for their economy. Many have transformed themselves into tourist towns. Others have attracted software designers, stock traders, and other entrepreneurs of the information age. Still others have evolved local economies based on exportable arts and crafts. In general, the smart ones anticipate the shift and ensure a hospitable environment for other, more renewable economic activities well before the change takes place.

Seek Ways to Strengthen the Economy Without Increasing 'Throughput'

Any material process has its inputs and outputs. The sum of the materials that are processed, used, and turned into waste can be termed "throughput."

Many communities think that the way to improve themselves is to increase throughput, to do more of what they're already doing—harvest more corn or trees, make more widgets, attract more tourists. Sometimes this works in the short run, but over the longer term the full social and environmental costs of these enterprises—often hidden—may outweigh their benefits. If so, increasing throughput will only dig the community deeper into the hole.

Innovative communities and businesses create more jobs by further refining their products before exporting them out of the community. Instead of harvesting more, they "add value" to what they've already harvested; instead of making more widgets, they make better widgets; instead of wooing more tourists, they create more interesting experiences that encourage tourists to stay longer.

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'I'm Making it up in Volume'

Throughput can be likened to cashflow in a business. Increasing throughput, like increasing cashflow, doesn't necessarily solve problems, and it may even make them worse—we've all heard the one about the guy who was losing money on every unit he sold, but he was "making it up in volume."

Here's another anecdote that neatly illustrates the problem of throughput:

An enthusiastic middle manager, having been laid off from his job, buys a truck and a load of wholesale fruit and vegetables to sell out on the highway. Business is good. By the end of the day, he's sold nearly all his produce.

When he gets home, he tells his wife about his successful day. When he's finished, she asks him how much he paid for the produce.

Two thousand dollars, he says.

And how much did he earn selling it?

I don't know, he says, I haven't counted it yet. So he goes and counts the money. He comes back and announces he earned $1,800.

Hmm, his wife says, there seems to be a problem.

Yeah, the man says, I need a bigger truck.

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Focus More on Getting Better, Less on Getting Bigger

As mentioned earlier, a smart community looks for ways to develop itself without necessarily expanding. It understands that communities have more options than just accepting another subdivision, a big-box retailer, a casino, or another industry. The second chapter of the *Economic Renewal Guide* highlights a number of creative alternatives to the standard bigger-is-better approach.

Seek Development that Increases Diversity and Self-Reliance

It's well known that a town with several kinds of export businesses is stronger and more resilient than another with only one. With more diversity, fewer jobs are likely to be jeopardized at one time by fluctuations in the national or international economy.

Diversity tends to come not only from big, attention-grabbing plant openings, but also from "micro-enterprises" starting up in garages, living rooms, and barns. Other things being equal, twenty new businesses with two employees each are far preferable to one new business with forty employees.

Some businesses increase local self-reliance by supplying goods and services that had previously been imported into the community. Businesses that serve the local market are less vulnerable to the uncertainties of the international economy. Diversity and self-reliance are also strengthened when businesses and families save money through resource efficiency, as the second chapter of the *Economic Renewal Guide* shows.

Put Waste to Work

We've grown used to throwing our waste away because "away" was always free. But in the process, we've polluted the land, water, and air that were so conveniently "away." In recent years the public has demanded more stringent health and environmental protections, and governments now require expensive waste-disposal facilities. Meanwhile, land for disposal has become increasingly valuable, making "away" even more expensive.

But waste is simply a misplaced resource. Innovative business people and communities are finding less expensive—even profitable—ways to reuse, recycle, or biodegrade discarded materials, and they're putting people to work doing it. The motto these days is "waste equals food": the byproduct from one business or process may be useful as the raw material for another. Market forces are gradually bending the old linear path of extraction (or harvest)–production–consumption–disposal into a closed circuit, where the last step loops around to connect with the first. Many materials that once came from virgin sources are now recycled from waste, and people are now finding jobs, for example, processing discarded plastic and wood into composite building materials.

Regard Quality of Life as an Essential Asset

High quality of life is usually good for business. Most companies looking for a place to start or move seek not only a positive business environment but a community with good schools, clean air and water, and safe and quiet streets. Many communities that have allowed their quality of life to be degraded have found it much harder to attract and retain good employers.

Wise community leaders are realizing that quality of life and a strong sense of place aren't intangible options, they're vital assets that nurture residents and support the local economy. In addition, an increasing number of community residents are willing to say out loud that development means more than business, it means preserving and enhancing a great place to live. They're saying that they want their towns to continue to be places they and their children can call home. They won't sacrifice their home for short-term gain.

Consider the Effects of Today's Decisions on Future Generations

In 1987, the United Nations Commission of Environment and Development declared that sustainable development "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

If a community economy is based on the stewardship of such important local assets as trees or the nutrients in the soil, then future generations will be able to make a living in the same way. In contrast, economic activity that depletes resources creates a daunting future for a community's children. This concept is also sometimes referred to as "generational equity."

Consider the Off-Site Effects of Decisions

Many development proposals look good when analyzed only for their direct costs and benefits. Unfortunately, most communities fail to consider all the off-site and indirect impacts. For example, the drawings for a proposed motel in a tourist town may look terrific. Maybe the owner is proposing to plant lots of trees on a formerly degraded industrial site. But a broader look at the proposal might disclose dramatic increases in traffic past a school or through a quiet residential area. Off-site concerns may lead the community to turn down the proposal, or they might lead to creating a better one with more appropriate access that hurts no one.

Consider the Cumulative Effects of a Series of Decisions

A decision may appear sound when judged in isolation, but how does it hold up when placed in the context of other decisions that are being made or have been made?

Here's a real-life example. A small town in Colorado had a state highway running along its outskirts, with the local school occupying land on the near side of the highway. The owner of an undeveloped tract opposite the school proposed building a modest shopping center. On its own, the proposal sounded good: the stores would generate tax revenue and they'd be easy to access. The town council approved it. Later, because so many kids were dodging traffic to purchase treats at the new shopping center, the highway department decided to build a bypass a half-mile further from town. The town council then figured it would be OK to approve more commercial and residential development along the old highway, but that in turn overcrowded the school to point that the school board had to build a new one. But because expansion had helped escalate land prices, the new school had to be built on cheaper land on the far side of the bypass. As a result, students now must cross the new highway to get to it.

By failing to consider the cumulative effects of decisions, local leaders only worsened the problems they were trying to solve. They didn't ask themselves what unintended consequences might result from each "solution" they chose.

Measure Whether Actions Actually Do What They're Intended to Do

Sustainable development views the economy, community, and environment holistically; it looks at the big picture, paying careful attention to underlying causes and effects. Communities and businesses working toward sustainability therefore need to listen closely to feedback—not just the verbal kind, but all the various indicators of community health, trends, and cause-and-effect relationships. When weighing an idea or strategy, they should examine its direct and indirect effects, look for unintended negative consequences, and discontinue or modify it if it doesn't appear to be working. When conditions change, they should alter their strategy or actions in order to achieve the same goals. This approach is often referred to as "adaptive management." It may sound obvious, but communities, like individuals, tend to get stuck in certain patterns of thinking and don't always notice that their views are based on obsolete information.

Consider a community that's experiencing rapid increases in housing prices. Officials conclude that the problem is insufficient supply for the demand, so they start encouraging more housing construction. This strategy has the desired effect in the short term, but after a couple of years, expansion-fueled speculation and an influx of buyers from more expensive housing markets start driving prices up again. Delayed reactions such as this are common in complex systems like communities; it can take years or even decades to receive feedback on certain decisions. While it's better not to create a housing boom in the first place, the community may not have been able to foresee it. The important thing is to be sensitive to the first signs that the policy might not be working, and be prepared to alter it accordingly.

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Vital Signs of Sustainability

Once a community has decided to become more sustainable, how does it know if its efforts are working? A growing number of communities—including Seattle, Portland (Oregon), and Jacksonville (Florida)—have devised "indicators of sustainability" to gauge their progress, raise awareness, and develop tools for decision-makers. Though different for each community, these indicators often include such vital signs as daily traffic volume, employment, air quality, housing, literacy, biodiversity, energy use, voter turnout, land use, and recycling.

Indicators aren't new—sales tax, housing starts, and per-capita income have long been used to measure what we've always called progress. But the new emphasis on sustainability recognizes that the old indicators offered, at best, a partial picture of a community's health. The booklet *Monitoring Sustainability in Your Community* (see appendix) gives tips on choosing indicators to create a more complete picture of your community's progress.

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Where Do We Go From Here?

While expansion was once seen as the only track to prosperity, the good news for both declining and expanding communities is that there is an alternative. Prosperity doesn't necessarily require expansion, it requires development that is sustainable.

Though this paperchallenges common assumptions about growth, it's only a brief exploration of these ideas. The questions it raises are sufficiently complex to justify entire books. Those working to put sustainable development into practice soon learn that the concept can be ambiguous and even elusive. For example, if a corporation proposes a facility that hires most of its workers from outside, imposes a tax burden on community inhabitants, or endangers the quality of the ground water, most people will recognize that it's a bad idea because it can't be sustained over time to benefit the community. But most proposals aren't so easily judged. Often, the best a community can do is determine whether a particular proposal will move the community toward or away from sustainability.

Though the answers may not be easy or clearly defined, the above guidelines provide a general framework for approaching sustainability. The rest of this guide sets out a more specific process for incorporating sustainability into community decision-making.

The controversy, uncomfortable changes, and side effects of expansion aren't confined to a few places. They're being played out in communities across the planet as the global economy touches each individual's life, as the population swells, as resources become scarcer, and as humankind's wastes (from greenhouse gases to pesticide residues to nuclear waste) exceed the planet's capacity to absorb them. It's becoming clear that if our development strategies aren't sustainable, they will be terminal.

But within this crisis are substantial opportunities and solid reasons for hope. Increasing numbers of citizens in overgrown communities are unwilling to drown passively in someone else's prosperity. Those in declining communities are organizing to ensure a better future. Committed people are speaking out and acting for humane and sustainable development to create the kind of economy in which future generations can thrive. Increasingly, they find that others are listening.

Opportunities and reasons for hope are found in the next chapter, which explores Economic Renewal as a practical way to move communities in the direction of a more sustainable future.