

Community Engagement is Key to Making Milwaukee Sustainable

by Michael Carriere

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For the past 10 weeks, I have been teaching a course called "The Sustainable City." Using Milwaukee as a case study, my students have attempted to answer a question that is on the lips of many Americans: What is the future of our urban centers?

There is little doubt that the current financial crisis has complicated matters, adding to a legacy of deindustrialization that has wracked locations like Milwaukee. Yet this moment of crisis may also be a moment of opportunity. As issues related to urban development, industry and even ownership are thrown into flux, cities are using this moment to re-imagine themselves as greener, more sustainable places.

Many of these re-imaginings of the city involve large-scale development projects that rely heavily on partnerships between the public and private sectors. Overzealous free marketers take note: Government matters.

In Milwaukee, local officials have created the conditions - primarily through tax incentives - that encourage sustainable development. Yet there is a real need to cultivate private investment. Such capital is vital to making cities even more sustainable.

However, real urban sustainability, my class concluded, must come about through a process of community engagement, one that requires an active and involved citizenry. By privileging the importance of governmental and corporate actors, we overshadow the roles that communities and individuals can and do play here, allowing urban sustainability to become a top-down affair.

Such a dynamic puts on display the shortcomings of these official redevelopment strategies, while making it clear that those with the deepest pockets still seem to control redevelopment within the city. Instead, we must view urban sustainability from the bottom up and work to change the minds and behaviors of urban residents with the same gusto that we put toward changing the city's landscape. Only then will we get at what is worth sustaining in a sustainable city.

Of course, my class examined the impending arrival of Spanish firms Talgo and Ingeteam, whose plans for the city provide for both economic and physical sustainability to take root in areas of the city that have been hit hardest by capital flight: the abandoned Tower Automotive site and the Menomonee Valley, respectively.

The Talgo facility is predicted to create 125 direct positions, while the Ingeteam project is expected to employ about 275 workers by 2015. Perhaps more important, these facilities are helping to sustain Milwaukee's manufacturing heritage. The products these facilities will produce - rail vehicles (Talgo) and wind turbines (Ingeteam) - also highlight that the city sees promise in sustainable transportation and energy systems.

Consider the government's role here. The State of Wisconsin provided Ingeteam with \$4.5 million in tax credits, while Milwaukee officials plan to spend up to \$30 million to improve the Tower site for Talgo. On the federal level, the American Recovery and Reinvestment stimulus funds are being tapped by both Wisconsin and Oregon officials to purchase train cars to be produced at the Talgo Milwaukee site.

At the same time, groups such as Growing Power are tapping the resources of the private sector. Already a darling of the foundation world (Growing Power founder Will Allen received a \$500,000 "genius grant" from the John D. and Catherine T. McArthur Foundation in 2008), the north side urban farm is now courting the business world.

We Energies recently provided Growing Power with a grant to install an array of solar electric panels meant to heat the facility's greenhouse. Other urban farms are following Growing Power's lead: Sweet Water Organics, a thriving urban farm housed in a near south side abandoned industrial building, is working to secure a partnership with Roundy's, and the group's produce can be found in a host of local markets and restaurants, including Beans and Barley and La Merenda.

Yet such efforts must not eclipse the ways that smaller groups and individuals across the city are coming to use urban farming as a means to rethink the renewal of urban space, eating habits in minority neighborhoods and economic self-determinism. North side organizations such as Walnut Way and the Dominican Center for Women recently have developed community gardens in areas where access to healthy food is limited, and community members throughout Riverwest have created Concordia Gardens.

These grass-roots efforts have developed with little or no assistance from the private sector, and the city government is struggling to keep up with these developments; they are now in uncharted territory.

On May 29, the Victory Garden Initiative will hold its 2nd Annual Great Milwaukee Victory Garden Blitz, an event meant to draw attention to such projects across the city. To Victory Garden Initiative founder Gretchen Mead, the Blitz will draw attention to the fact that "by turning urban spaces and lawns into food-producing spaces, we can reduce the cost of our food and the use of fossil fuels needed" to transport these products.

Such a radical shift in mind-set is not about passively welcoming firms such as Talgo to the city; it is a transformative process that ultimately leads to a rethinking of the goods we consume - and how we can use the city to produce these goods.

Erik Lindberg, a steering committee member of the group Transition Milwaukee (a co-sponsor of the upcoming Blitz), recently noted that "government and industry have not provided sufficient and realistic leadership" on such issues as global warming, oil consumption and sustainable development - "and it's not clear if they can." The private sector will only R&D to a certain degree and governments simply do not have the resources to tackle such problems.

"A great deal can be accomplished in the space in between the individual and government, within a community," Lindberg said. Such an evolution in individual and communal urban mind-sets will not be easy, but it is within these spaces that a truly sustainable city must begin.

Michael Carriere is an assistant professor at the Milwaukee School of Engineering, where he teaches courses on urban history, political science, public policy and urban design.