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The Re-Greening of Anguilla, Part 3

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When I began this series of articles on the issue of Environmental Consciousness and Sustainability, Anguilla was in the midst of rampant development and growth. Many of us were justifiably alarmed at the scale and density of development that was being planned, and in particular by the impacts this development might have on Anguilla both as a society and as a natural, living organism. Threats to both social stability, and environmental and man-made infrastructure were feared, even as many were looking forward to a new era of economic growth. As work commenced and geared up on a couple of the big resort developments, some immediate changes began to be felt. Anguillians began to encounter the ramifications of housing, and containing, large groups of temporary immigrant populations. Formerly quiet roads began to be overtaken by the noise, dirt and congestion of large construction vehicles. Other commercial and residential construction projects started to spring up, based on the presumed spike in market demand that would grow out of the increased tourist and service populations that would need to be served. (Many of these lie dormant, as unfinished and unsightly construction sites.) And crime, including violent incidents, began to shatter the peaceful, friendly and safe environment that we have all cherished for so long.

While many voices rose up to question the apparent lack of the kind of long term planning that would be necessitated by the seemingly explosive growth that was already underway, it was unclear as to whether the potential threats that might ensue were well understood. Moreover, everyone seemed so intent upon reaping the potential financial benefits of all this real estate and economic development that the commensurate analysis and strategic planning required to ensure that all this activity would benefit the island as a whole far into the future was largely lacking altogether.

What a difference a year makes.

As we all know too well, the global financial recession has hit Anguilla hard. Not only have tourist visits, and dollars, fallen precipitously following the economic crisis. But, as a natural consequence of a sharp decrease in available cash and disappearing credit, both sales and construction have slowed dramatically, where they have not actually come to a complete stop. There are many devastating consequences of this situation, both to people's livelihood and to their assets. As an architect working on the island, I have certainly felt the impact of the slowdown in the emergence of new projects and the temporary suspension of existing ones.

So what does all this have to do with sustainability and the creation of a 'green' Anguilla?

Plenty. If there is any silver lining to the dark clouds that have temporarily descended on us, it is the gift of time. Time to reflect. Time to prepare. Time to ensure that when we resume the development that will inevitably come, we do so with a smarter strategy to ensure our success as an island and a people. While we wait patiently for an up-tick in the economy that will return us to economic growth, we should be using this gift of time to plan for a better, greener Anguilla.

The areas we will need to address in our planning for growth are myriad. They include a green infrastructure, sustainable development policies for planning, and building standards that foster

a healthier manner of building and dwelling in our homes, businesses and institutions. By tending to these concerns now, we can plot a more truly beneficial course for the future.

Green Infrastructure

Growth in development equals increasing need for energy, water and waste treatment. All of these items can be addressed in ways that help us and ways that harm us in the long run. Energy can be supplied through processes that involve the extraction of natural resources like coal, oil and gas, and their subsequent burning in a manner that pollutes the environment. Or, we can obtain the energy we need to power lights, machinery, appliances, air conditioners and the like through harnessing sustainable and renewable resources like the wind, the sun, and the sea tides. We should be actively looking into the potential to tap these resources on an island-wide scale. Once they are converted to electrical power, they can be distributed to our homes and businesses using the same power distribution network that we presently use.

When it comes to water, we must find ways to maximize the collection and re-use of the limited rainfall that we experience here. Not a drop should be wasted, because the alternative is the energy-depleting, polluting and costly practice of bringing water to the island on tanker ships and trucking it in to fill our cisterns. Of course, we are also increasingly expanding the use of government water, which is piped to us through underground distribution networks. There will always be the added requirement of this centrally-supplied water. But we can work a lot harder to produce potable water by the conversion of sea water to drinkable water, through various large scale de-salinization and reverse osmosis processes. Finally, just as we must conserve every drop that we collect, we should be much more proactive in re-using 'grey' water for irrigating gardens, powering certain types of machinery, flushing toilets, etc.

In addition to finding ways to produce less waste by reducing the amount of disposable packaging that we use, the main thing we can do as a community is re-cycle. We all know that organized programs for re-cycling glass, plastics, metals, and paper products can produce large scale benefits. Many of these materials can be sold for re-use, if collected and processed on a large enough scale. We should be looking into the creation of recycling drop-off/collection stations around the island and/or a government program for pick-up of these waste products for export and/or local processing.

Sustainable Development

There is no substitute for well-informed and intelligent planning if we are to achieve the kind of responsible development that will preserve the beauty and health of Anguilla, while bringing economic progress and stability to the greatest number of its inhabitants. This will involve planning tools like zoning, conservation and preservation, and most importantly, community participation in the process of assessing both needs and a common vision for how the island should look and feel in five, ten, twenty years and beyond. The government can be instrumental in holding community meetings to find out what people are thinking, what they want, and what they want to avoid. Are the needs in the area of health care, schools, low cost housing, more access to retail and/or services? What is the sentiment regarding the celebration of cultural heritage, the enhancement of the arts, the easy access to outdoor recreation? All these issues and more can be ascertained by simply asking the right questions. The wise edicts that have limited certain types of development, visits by large cruise ships, and casinos are proof that the

public speaks and the government listens.

Based on this kind of input, physical planning can begin. Planning, land use and zoning regulations can be reviewed and revised to stipulate that commercial development must be accompanied by the provision of beneficial resources to the community. Whether through taxation on development or the requirement that developers provide the actual design and construction of these public facilities, Anguillians can reap the rewards of development through enhancement of their social and physical infrastructure.

This improvement of infrastructure can also be applied to the improvement of roads, the creation of heritage sites, parks, preserves, walking trails and bikeways, and other public amenities. Which, of course, brings us back to a key environmental issue: uncontrolled construction development runs the risk of overrunning the natural environment. We must be vigilant in identifying sensitive natural and cultural sites and mandate that they be protected in perpetuity. We must stipulate that unique natural features are identified and conserved. We must ensure that a reasonable proportion of all the land is left unbuilt to provide the physical and psychological context for healthy living, for human beings and the rich panoply of life forms with whom we share this island.

Planning also means zoning regulations that attempt to create pleasant, safe and attractive communities. I have been chagrined to see the kind of formless commercial development that has blighted the main roads on the island. There has been no common strategy to promote pedestrian safety or ease. No planning for continuous sidewalks, street plantings, or signage standards. We cannot even decide whether vehicular parking should be in front of the building, behind it, on the side, or all over the place. Left unaddressed, physical planning issues like these can serve to guarantee that we can expect the worst, as can be seen across the channel in St. Maarten and so many other places where development has seemed to trump the public interest.

Building Regulations

This is probably the touchiest area of all. People don't like to be told what they can and can't do with their own property, or how they should live. And I, for one, am a great proponent of personal freedom, if it comes with responsibility to our neighbors and the world. I wrote in my last article about what we can do to create more environmentally responsible living environments for ourselves. I listed ways we can conserve energy and water, re-use and recycle, plant indigenous gardens, and build houses that incorporate green design features and utilize renewable energy sources. These same principles apply to our places of work, worship, learning, and recreation. Building codes already attempt to protect people's safety. They can be expanded to ensure accessibility for all (as with the ADA /Americans With Disabilities Act). They can be enhanced by enacting Energy Codes (as many, if not all, states in the US have done). And, when we're talking about larger scale development, this means demanding of these much more intensive users of resources and energy that they adhere to the highest possible planning and building standards. On the one hand, we can turn to the LEED program of the U.S. Green Building Design Council for guidance. They publish very clear criteria for achieving high level environmental standards. We could easily extrapolate our own standards by referring to these and other guidelines that have already been created. And we must carefully review the density of development envisioned by their creators. While densely packed construction can be

utilized beneficially to leave a greater proportion of natural environments undeveloped, it can also lead to an overtaxing of both the land and the infrastructure required to service it. It is unusual to find a developer who does not attempt to build more than is advisable in order to increase their financial return. The government, through its oversight and the laws it enacts, is our first line of protection against finding out too late that we have lost what we value most about our environment.

It's Up To Us

The government, of course, is working every day to protect the environment. And, for over a year now, Anguilla has had its own Sustainable Energy Committee, a group of concerned citizens from government, the energy utilities, and the private sector. That Committee produced an Action Plan and Draft Policy that seeks to help make Anguilla more sustainable and independent from an energy acquisition and use point of view. But, most of all, what I have been trying to describe in this series of articles is that there is plenty we can do—in our lifestyles and attitudes, in our homes and out in nature, in the choices we make and the priorities we set. Perhaps most importantly, in the vision that we hold of a healthier environment for Anguilla's children and grandchildren, and the commitments we are willing to make, and keep, to realize that goal. As the old adage goes: If not us, who? If not now, when?