

Foreword

SUSTAINABILITY AND ITS COROLLARY, “sustainable development,” can sound like overused buzzwords. Even worse, these words have been used by some organizations and governments to justify everything from nuclear power to genetically engineered foods, based on the rationalization that these activities are somehow sustainable. Yet, by acquiring a deeper understanding of the meaning of these terms, we can reclaim their enormous significance as concepts for improving our communities and the lives of our citizens.

In Burlington, Vermont, the city where I am mayor, an activist municipal government has worked in partnership with citizens, the private sector, and a network of municipally supported nonprofit organizations to pursue a strategy for sustainable development since the early 1980s — before the term sustainable development was invented. Through the 1980s and 1990s, this strategy involved generating new sources of public revenue, ensuring a publicly controlled waterfront, producing permanently affordable housing, stabilizing residential neighborhoods, reducing energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, requiring the recycling of solid waste, protecting the water quality of Lake Champlain, and removing barriers preventing women and minorities from enjoying the fruits of economic growth.

While our strategy and its policies long guided economic development efforts and city programs, we knew we needed to do more to develop a strong local economy, protect our environment, and build a more livable city. We became keenly aware of the need to establish a widespread understanding of how individual projects connect, to create a comprehensive vision for our future embraced by the entire community, and to develop an integrated approach to achieving that vision. To do this, we initiated the Burlington Legacy Project in 1999 to encourage our whole community to think systematically about our future and to bring all sectors of the community together to develop a vision for Burlington in the year 2030.

Our Legacy Project was the equivalent of the Local Agenda 21 planning process employed in communities around the world as a response to the first Earth Summit in Rio in 1992. Our approach focused on social, economic, and environmental conditions and needs. We engaged all sectors of our community with extensive outreach efforts, and a diverse group of key stakeholders steered the process. In addition, Burlington's full range of non-profit organizations, businesses, government agencies, and community groups participated in creating our vision, identifying priorities and goals, and defining local indicators.

In developing the Legacy Project, the City partnered with the Vermont-based Institute for Sustainable Communities (ISC). Incorporated in 1991, this independent, non-profit organization provides training, technical assistance, and financial support to communities around the world in its effort to promote environmental protection and economic and social well-being. Not incidentally, Gwendolyn Hallsmith, author of this book, served as the key ISC staff on our Legacy Project and contributed significantly to the project's success.

Through the Legacy Project, our community learned more about the potential of sustainable development. We began to look beyond pat solutions for narrowly defined problems and to define sustainability more comprehensively. Ultimately, we emerged from the planning process poised to talk less, to act more, and to ensure that our actions were based on better understandings of whole systems, rather than isolated parts.

Another important outcome of our Legacy Project was a detailed directory of the various strategies implemented by both the public and private sectors in Burlington over the past two decades. These strategies have played key roles in making Burlington one of the country's most livable cities. This directory, along with our Legacy Project Action Plan, can be found on-line at www.chedo.ci.burlington.vt.us/legacy/index.html.

This book offers conceptual tools fundamental to building sustainable communities, as well as a template for the building process itself. Gwendolyn Hallsmith explores the systems dynamics of social change and community development, developing the kind of comprehensive understanding that will help communities treat more than mere symptoms and achieve lasting results. She draws on her experience and

Burlington's experience with the Legacy Project to outline a way in which other cities can envision a more sustainable future and develop an integrated action plan to achieve it.

The upshot of all this is additional clarity about sustainability and its significance for the future of the Earth's cities. Much more than an overused catchword, sustainability becomes a visionary and practical tool, a concept that leads to meaningful action. For cities and towns, such action can mean a more cohesive vision for the future, a stronger sense of place, a shared understanding of community assets, more efficient use of resources, healthier ecosystems, more productive partnerships among community stakeholders, and public dialogue that is engaging, inclusive, and constructive.

As a mayor committed to building a sustainable city, I have gained much from other communities' best practices and lessons learned. I hope you find this book a valuable resource as you work to make your own community more sustainable.

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