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Hi Andrew,

There are, for me, two issues that need to be addressed before it is worthwhile to discuss town development. The first is getting out of the mindset that growth of any kind is unquestionably good, that we have no responsibility for our numbers or impact, and that more material wealth is a benefit. Once we begin to take responsibility for our lives and impacts, we start to look for what is BETTER, not bigger, and intuitively reach for things that feel and are good - for others as well as ourselves.

The second issue is restoring a sacred connection - individually and as a culture - with all of creation. Without that, all we do is and feels wrong. Painting buildings a different colour or planting trees doesn't change it. We watch soaps put on TV to sell advertising, instead of taking active, vulnerable part in community ritual, for example. Once we reconnect with the sacred and begin again to put life-force energy into the things we make, anything we do feels and is different. I've seen patterns of backyard housing, town development, etc. that feel wonderful - and seemingly identical ones that feel awful. It is these two qualitative issues that seem to make the difference, not specific details about how development occurs.

*How should small towns capitalise on their natural advantages without losing them?*

That question is a good example of the issues above! To "capitalize" on something is taking a mindset to exploit it. That in itself causes us to lose what we had. If there are wonderful things that a small town has (and smallness is one of them), they should be cherished, not exploited. What's more, we should then find ways to help others have the same advantages - where they are - to keep them from wanting to crowd in to get access to ours.

*Do regional centres have any opportunities to lead the way in viable, sustainable alternatives in housing? Why or why not?*

Any one, and any place has opportunity to take leadership in demonstrating good patterns. You don't have to be big. But regional centres often have control of patterns of employment, resource access, education, health care, etc. Getting out of the mindset of "bigger is better", those resources can be made accessible everywhere, not just in big cities. It makes more sense to have a specialist doctor make weekly rounds to small communities, rather than have all the patients travel to the city to see them, for example.

*What about open space on the edges of regional towns? Shouldn't that be used to build more houses on quarter acre blocks?*

Are you looking at open space as something to be exploited for people - for recreation or housing? Or are you looking first at the intrinsic value of those places, our bureaucratic

tendency to centralize everything into regional towns, overall patterns of living, etc? Are you assuming that "more" people and houses, concentrated in the regional town, are desirable - and therefore ensuring that we have that? Why do we use working and living patterns that cause a need to "recreate" as a result?

*Are there alternatives to sprawl versus higher density?*

The actual closeness of our homes to each other, or of home to work is a relatively small factor. The impacts of any community pattern is global today. Impacts of shipping products and people around the world to wherever we live is far greater than housing density. There are housing and community patterns that can keep us in touch with the earth and each other, while using far less resources, of course, and those should be considered. Work patterns that employ and build skills, rather than lessening their need, produce an entirely different community. Self-employment, self-reliance, and self-restraint similarly produce a very different life and community than working for big companies.

It is vital to focus on community, not on "towns". It is the community interconnection of people, of people and place, and us with other life that is the living part of a "town". The roads, buildings, etc. are the dead shell that houses the life. Look first to the life and its vitality. The other will alter to fit.

We tend to look at everything with the materialistic, "economic" viewpoint that has been core to modern culture. Most of those viewpoints are not intrinsically "economic", but wilful misuse of economics to convince us to permit centralization of wealth in a few hands. My most recent book, *"Learning to Count What REALLY Counts: The Economics of Wholeness"*, shows numerous examples of how we can obtain order-of-magnitude improvements in "economic" performance by integrating values, ecology, and the sacred into economics. Qualitative differences are more fundamentally valuable than quantitative ones, and our true individual and social goals lie in the realm of values and the spirit.

When we make that shift, everything changes. Last summer I won a national "sustainable design" award for a community bank in a small town of 800 people. People are amazed, going into it. They say it feels sacred, like a church. I was amazed, in turn. Shouldn't EVERYTHING we make - our homes, workplaces, community facilities - be filled with beauty and the sacred? The true heart of a community bank is a community sharing their dreams back and forth, so all can achieve them when needed. That's very different from "mega-banking", and a true example of what things feel like when we shift to doing things from values that are life-enhancing for all of creation.

Tom Bender