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Thursday, April 26, 2018

***Breaking News:***  
Bill Cosby found guilty

## Shifting plans into projects

Commentary

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Dan JONES

It was a bit over a year ago that we completed the Sustainable Montpelier 2030 Design Competition. Many of you participated in re-imagining our future city as a place that can prosper in the many challenges facing us. In fact, some Montpelierites believe that the winning design is now part of the city's official planning process. But it isn't — yet. It's a vision that needs a lot of work to make real. We figured you might like a report on the progress toward realizing this vision over the past year and consider what needs to happen next.

toward turning that vision into an on-the-ground reality. This has required the adoption of two big ideas: First, we are using a “systems approach” to address the complex interacting dynamics involved in reaching our goals of a sustainable future city; second, we are building a local coalition to focus the work toward these goals.

To understand a “systems approach,” imagine getting beyond our common tendencies to think in a straight line about problems and solutions. Our best research showed that building a higher-density, energy-efficient downtown could help us thrive through coming climate and economic challenges. Traditionally, if a city wants high-density downtown development it simply needs to acquire the land, attract the financing and the construction capacity and *voilà*, we have our desired future. But what if that needed land is paved over with parking lots? Then, we must first address transportation structures before we can even look at building issues. To look at transportation issues, we need to then think about the economic, social and psychological dynamics of our current car culture. So, we have a set of overlapping interactions that require looking at all the key elements that comprise the path to our desired future. Identifying which parts need to be addressed together will allow the next development



Currently, with the majority of our downtown real estate dedicated to parking lots, we are prevented from developing the tax-producing housing and commercial spaces, along with preventing riverfront access envisioned in the competition's finalist designs. We can't just wish away the cars on those lots because real people need the cars to get to work. It has become painfully clear that the designer's future dreams cannot be realized without dealing with the auto-centric transportation system that currently demands so much downtown real estate. We needed a new approach, one that would include all interests in our city.

To ensure community involvement in this challenge, last summer we formed the Sustainable Montpelier Coalition. A coalition is an organizational structure that allows a number of different interests, institutions and organizations to come together to address what they understand to be a shared community challenge. We believe the current political, economic and public-service interests all recognize the growing systems challenge. However, we also face a political and institutional environment in which the ways we make decisions have been compartmentalized into silos of interests. Commuters demand places for their cars,



tax revenue. Faced with such competing demands and interests, we each can get so wrapped up in those mixed interests that we often feel powerless in the face of overwhelming challenges.

By coming together in coalition to address the intersecting issues, we can create the capacity to manage the competing interests that currently paralyze much of our decision systems. A small example of how this collective effort needs to work was seen last fall, when the coalition assisted the Capital City Farmers Market's trial move up onto State Street. Working with the farmers, the city and the downtown businesses, we helped demonstrate how this cooperative coalition approach could create a general improvement in our quality of life. Oh, and it also helped demonstrate the value of a pedestrian-focused downtown that doesn't need as much parking. This coming summer, that experiment led all the participants to decide that a walkable State Street would be the permanent Saturday home of the market.

Would that all our challenges were that easy to address.

Recently, the proposal for the new hotel and parking garage has people asking us, what happened? That proposal doesn't look anything like the designs our citizens voted on. And no, it doesn't. However, we are not an official city effort despite public voting in

effect of law. If people want the winning designs to be a blueprint for our collective future, then the Planning Commission and City Council need to see that the planned initiatives have broad support.

To assist in shifting from plans to projects, the Sustainable Montpelier Coalition will next be bringing together key stakeholders in “roundtables” focused on creating the needed opportunities in transportation, housing and open spaces. Out of these first roundtables will then grow a series of public forums to consider the proposals and to decide what level of energy our residents wish to bring to proposed efforts needed. People will decide how much they can reasonably expect from their elected representatives and how much they will need to make happen on their own.

The looming challenges in our environment and economy require a greater level of responsiveness than is currently available from just our governance structures. Our state government is saddled with declining revenues and too many competing demands. Added to that, most of us feel powerless to do anything about it except hope for change in the next election. Well, I have news for you. You can do something now that is important. Joining in coalition right here in Montpelier can make democracy live

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local environment and the systems that daily touch our lives. Let's keep it moving and keep it local.

*Dan Jones is Sustainable Montpelier Coalition executive director.*

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