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A daunting but optimistic transformation

Commentary

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Seeing the damage wrought by monster hurricanes in the Caribbean, Florida and Texas, Vermonters easily empathize. We remember those first few days after Tropical Storm Irene when we lost whole downtowns to flooding and the task of rebuilding seemed daunting. The rapidity of the climate disruption this year is dramatic. How would Vermont hold up if we were hit by something as enormous as Harvey or Irma?

Previously, I've written about the challenge of creating a sustainable future in a changing climate and its implications for the economy. Lately, I've been thinking about the paths that could help us thrive despite inevitable new climate challenges.

Fortunately, the first hard part of creating a sustainable future is mostly accomplished. The Sustainable Montpelier Design Competition, completed in January, showed us new ways we might approach the challenges of affordable housing, land use and energy demands. Hundreds of our citizens helped to create and support this vision. Now these citizens deserve a rational development process that moves Montpelier toward realizing the vision.

Before we can move into a desired future, let's take a look at the city's present challenges. For instance, there is the difficult fact that about 60 percent of our downtown real estate is now devoted to commuter parking lots. These lots don't generate an income for the city and generally

provides negative tax revenue for the city through the demands of traffic on our roads, sewers and bridges. During rainstorms, they create pools of toxic runoff that go into our wastewater system and eventually into our lakes and rivers. The parking lots block any future development, while cutting us off from the water and trees along our scenic river. However, most of those parking lots provide what is considered an employee benefit to the city's largest employers, such as the state of Vermont. The real cost to the city for this grossly inefficient land use is much greater than anyone wants to consider.

Now imagine that we had buildings on those parking lots instead — new, energy-efficient buildings combining commercial real estate with affordable, high-density housing. Imagine that some of these buildings held collaborative work spaces where entrepreneurs could bring their new ideas to life, developing a creative local economy along with the production and skills needed to maintain the local economy at large. Imagine that these buildings were also affordable homes for downsizing seniors as well as young workers and families. (Right now there's a massive shortage of senior housing, and rental rates are too high for younger people to afford.)

Cities that combine high-density living and working in this way are exponentially more efficient in terms of both heating and transportation demands.

Check out small European cities connected by rail and surrounded by farmland to see examples of substantial energy efficiency. The design competition provided visions of a whole bunch of Montpelier-scale development, which would create taxable housing and commercial space on the land now occupied by parking lots. However, a transformation from the current land use to a more efficient future will require all of us to adjust our expectations of continuing our dispersed, auto-dependent lives on the hillsides.

To empty our costly, non-tax-producing parking lots, to make way for housing, we first need new ways for our commuters and residents to get conveniently in and out-of-town and move from place to place. If we are serious about moving toward a sustainable future, then alternate transportation options must be our first priority. The Sustainable Montpelier Coalition will be offering multiple initiatives to address this challenge.

If we, for the moment, assume that we can get the commuters into and out-of-town cheaply and conveniently, our next priority will be to get to work on finding developers to help build the future on the newly freed parking craters. We certainly need housing, especially what's called affordable, market-rate housing. We need commercial spaces, community spaces and open spaces. We need that housing and commercial space to be built to net-zero standards, where the energy demands are equivalent to what can be provided locally.

Now we get to the hard part: Who is going to pay for this? That probably won't be the federal government, since our current federal budget is now going to be committed to disaster relief and, of course, to continuing military demands. Our state budget is being cut, too. The only solution, then, will be to create local finance mechanisms that will allow us to mobilize our local capital and keep it working at home. We will be working on ideas such as a Montpelier Investment Fund, which will provide local financing capacity, and of course, we are eager to engage some of the really smart people who live here in helping us with this challenge.

If the devastation of this year's hurricane and fire season has taught us anything, it's that now is the time to start considering what will be needed to build a sustainable future — one in which the young can not just survive, but thrive. We have built up a substantial debt to the future, and the cost of that debt goes up the longer we ignore it.

We want to build a future we and our kids want to inhabit and that will provide the security only community can offer. We are blessed that this precious community exists here, though as in any community it can fracture unless we all choose to give over our short-term concerns to build a desirable future.

Remember the idea of sustainability is to have a system that leaves the same capacity for consumption to the next generation as enjoyed by their parents. It's a daunting but optimistic vision of committing to build, with our youth, a future that will nurture us as we age and nurture the young builders who will age here in the coming generations.

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