



Environmental Justice Advocates Call for Inclusive Green Economy

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A group of nearly 100 environmental justice advocates from across the country attended the first annual Capitol Hill Summit on Sustainable Communities, Environmental Justice and the New Economy, a two-day conference held October 15th and 16th in Washington, DC. Sponsored by the Sustainable Communities Development Group (SCDG), the conference, in the words of Deohn Ferris, Executive Director of SCDG, sought to focus in on the “nexus of public health, the environmental movement, and community development.”

A morning panel examined green development in the context of community finance. David Berenbaum, Chief Program Officer of the National Community Reinvestment Coalition, encouraged activists to use existing funding streams and policies, such as the federal government’s Neighborhood Stabilization Program and the Community Reinvestment Act, to secure federal grant and bank loan dollars to finance green projects. Ian Fisk, Executive Director of the William James Foundation noted that an increasing number of the projects supported by his foundation were in green industries, including initiatives in deconstruction, car sharing, and green building.

A second panel featured African American mayors hailing from rural and suburban areas. A key theme was that basic issues of environmental health often trumped larger “green economy” goals. For example, Helenor Bell—Mayor of Haynesville, Alabama—noted that the City’s “well and lift stations are over 60 years old.” Eugene Grant, Mayor of the Washington, DC-suburb of Seat Pleasant, Maryland, noted that some communities in the United States still needed “access to clean drinking water.”

Later in the day, Rep. Emmanuel Cleaver II (Kansas City, MO) addressed the gap between the environmental justice movement’s public health focus and the green development coming out of Washington. Cleaver noted that, he “grew up 250 yards from the landfill and the cesspool in Wichita Falls, Texas” and has often felt that (white) environmentalists “care more about the polar bear than us.” The Green Impact Zone initiative in Kansas City that Cleaver has championed does not directly address public health concerns, but it does aim to focus federal environmental stimulus dollars to green a neighborhood consisting of a concentrated 150-block, low-income area. “We are going to weatherize every single house in 150 blocks,” Cleaver said. Cleaver noted. “We’re creating jobs: building a BRT [bus rapid transit line] – rebuilding the street that separated blacks & whites.”

These intersecting themes of public health and green development surfaced again in a panel of environmental justice in the green economy. Reverend Kendall Granger, Pastor of New Community Church in East St. Louis, Illinois, conceded that, “The environment to date has taken

a back seat in our work because of immediate pressing community needs.” Peggy Shephard, Executive Director of the WE ACT (West Harlem Environmental Action) in New York City, emphasized that, “Community based land use planning is key.” Steven McCulloch, Executive Director of Bethel New Life, a Chicago-based community development corporation, noted that Bethel works on a host of issues — including housing, transportation, crime prevention education, and public health “in an environmental justice context.” This work, according to McCulloch, ranges from environmental reclamation work, such as cleaning up underground storage tanks, to support for transit-oriented development and a broader community economic development agenda.

The theme of the second day of the conference was on “healthy neighborhoods, community well-being and the green economy.” At a roundtable session on healthy communities, Donele Williams, Executive Director of Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice — a group developing a triple bottom line” strategy (with economic, environmental, and social equity goals) called “Build Up Detroit” — emphasized the importance of “land trusts, land banks, and other innovative ways to make sure the land in our communities is protected for the future.” Dr. George C. Benjamin, Executive Director of the American Public Health Association, argued that public health must work to create communities that are “walkable, bike-able, green and where residents are able to get to health facilities when they need them.” Rebecca Monley, Executive Director of the National Center for Healthy Housing, noted that “one in three metropolitan-area homes has at least one health & safety problem” and that people of color were three times as likely to be living in hazardous homes. Both Sheila Crowley, Executive Director of the National Low Income Housing Coalition and Diana Takvorian, Executive Director of the California-based Environmental Health Coalition, emphasizing the importance of preserving existing affordable housing and meeting green goals through retrofitting. As Takvorian noted, “In many places retrofitting is the priority, not new green housing. We need to fix the existing conditions. We are not starting from a brand new land use plan.”

Smart growth was another key topic of discussion. Parris Glendening, former Governor of the State of Maryland and President of the Smart Growth Leadership Institute, noted that a key conundrum facing the smart growth movement was that, “Most Americans don’t like sprawl and don’t like density and will fight against both of them.” Glendening called for using inclusionary zoning to ensure that there is at least 20 percent affordable housing in smart growth developments to mitigate gentrification. Glendening expressed optimism that the Obama interagency group on Sustainable Communities (involving the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) the Department of Transportation (DOT) and the Environmental Protection Agency) would help spur action. David Lloyd, Director of the Office of Brownfields and Land Revitalization at the Environmental Protection Agency concurred with Glendening that “the partnership with HUD & DOT is going to be tremendous.” Savi Horne, Executive Director of the Land Loss Prevention Project, argued that smart growth “has to include a look at the food system [and promote] urban agriculture. If you can reduce the energy footprint, that’s going to return to us in terms of reducing the impact of diesel arriving in these communities — trucking in food. Food is at the center.” Scott Sklar, President of the Stella Group, emphasized the importance of building wealth in low-income communities. “As much as we want to create mixed-use developments,” Sklar noted, “you also want to create a venue not only where low-income community residents can live, but where they can create businesses and create wealth.”

John Topping, President of the Climate Institute, addressed the worldwide discussion of global warming and environmental health. Topping indicated that indoor air pollution caused 1.9 million deaths worldwide, more than twice the 800,000 deaths caused by malaria. “Reducing indoor air pollution also has carbon benefits,” Topping noted. Topping argued international development aid could help reduce global warming by replacing cook stoves that produce by global-warming inducing soot (black carbon) with more efficient stoves. Topping estimated that replacing 500 million cook stoves worldwide would cost \$12.5 billion plus dissemination costs. “That’s the cost of three or four coal power plants with carbon sequestration,” Topping said. The effort, he added, could also reduce deaths due to indoor air pollution by up to one million people a year.

Lisa Jackson, Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency and the first African American to hold that position, also addressed the conference. Jackson noted that, “African Americans die twice as often from asthma as whites and have higher cancer rates. Native Americans lack clean water at ten times the national average. Latinos suffer from air pollution disproportionately... We need to change the way we talk about these movements and change the face of environmentalism,” she argued.

For more information on the Sustainable Communities Development Group, see:
www.sustainablecommunitydevelopmentgroup.org.