

Remarks by
Salt Lake City Mayor Ralph Becker

**“From Self-Sufficiency to Sustainability:
Building on Our Heritage for a Sustainable Western Future”**

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Introduction

With just over one year under my belt as Mayor of Salt Lake City, I was recently invited to join a panel discussion with five previous Salt Lake City mayors. As the moderator introduced us, he gave a brief history of many past mayors and the actions that had preceded us: The terms of some of them were “cut short” amidst corruption scandals; one mayor oversaw the construction of our beautiful Richardsonian-style City Hall (a project that came in 300 percent over budget); and another mayor grappled with angry residents who swarmed the streets in a rage over home foreclosures. The audience was amused that many of the issues – the positive and the negative – repeat the past.

While we can certainly learn from the missteps of our predecessors to help us avoid repeating the unpleasant parts of our history, we can also learn from the positive and progressive steps, and use them as models for how we can live and govern today.

As a planner, and a Utah resident, I look respectfully to the early Mormon communities of the Mountain West that were shaped by the values of equitable land use, cultural diversity, affordable housing, managed growth and environmental stewardship. These communities were largely eliminated by urban sprawl, but they should serve as inspiration for the “New Urbanism” philosophy and contemporary planning. These communities were precursors to the livable, walkable, sustainable, mixed-use communities we seek today

A mid-19th century Mormon planning document, the City of Zion Plat, prescribed compact, high-density communities replete with mixed commercial and residential development, a town center, yard setbacks, small urban gardens, public spaces and cultural facilities that were altogether surrounded by open space. When a population threshold was reached, a buffer of land was reserved between established and new communities, preserving not only agricultural land and open space but also separate community identities. (The City of Zion Plat won the prestigious Planning Landmark Award of the American Planning Association.)

Challenges and Change

The wisdom of the past can be a guide for us today. Indeed, as we look at the sobering challenges we face in 2009, the innovations of our predecessors should help inspire us to find more durable, creative and sustainable ways of thinking, acting and building.

Different forces are at work, propelling us to change, forcing us to analyze, reevaluate and question our current practices. Challenges arise from alterations in both the **philosophical and literal climates**:

We now face an **economic climate** that President Obama calls “a full-blown crisis.” Congress recently approved a \$787 billion stimulus package, heeding Obama’s warning that “failure to act could turn a crisis into a catastrophe.” The health of our financial system is further being challenged, the New York Times reported last week, as the GDP experienced its steepest decline in more than 25 years. One economist quoted in the article said: “This will almost certainly be the longest postwar recession, and now potentially the deepest one as well.”

We know our **physical climate** is experiencing unprecedented warming, as illustrated by rising average air and ocean temperatures, accelerated snow and ice melts, and rising average sea levels.

Last weekend, I was backcountry skiing in the Wasatch Mountains with a good friend, Jeff Niermeyer, who is responsible for Salt Lake City watersheds. (More than 60 percent of Salt Lake City’s water comes from the Wasatch Canyons draining into the Salt Lake Valley.) Jeff and I often discuss what is happening in our Rocky Mountains and the best projections for our future.

As we skied, Jeff and I considered the Salt Lake Valley’s future: With less winter snowpack and the timing of our precipitation changing, our water system built off the snowpack and storing the runoff will be greatly reduced. Our ski industry will be dramatically reduced. Greater, longer beetle infestations will not only result in more dying off of our mountain forests and changing vegetation, but will result in more sedimentation of our streams and rivers. Already we are seeing winter rain at elevations of 9,000 feet on a relatively frequent basis, and lower elevation snowpack so greatly reduced that it is no longer a factor in our water storage around Salt Lake City. (Not to mention that we are having fewer of those wonderful champagne powder days in Wasatch.)

In Salt Lake, as everywhere, we will have no choice but to adapt to these radical changes.

As the world’s biggest consumer of energy, our nation faces an **energy climate** that is highly affected by oil shortages, peak oil (the known lifespan of oil reserves in the world relative to consumption), increases in oil prices, dependence on foreign oil and the environmental challenges associated with the burning of fossil fuels. We saw this same issue exposed with the oil crisis of the early 1970s, but our society didn’t respond with long-term measures.

Politically, the climate is also shifting – as many states that were once painted red are shifting to purple and blue. Colorado is a good example of this transformation. In 2008, for the first time in

recent memory, Colorado elected a Democratic presidential candidate and now claims two Democratic Senate seats, five Democratic members of its seven U.S. House seats, a Democratic governor and Democratic majorities in both houses of the state legislature. Our Rocky Mountain region has become the new political battleground for the nation.

The **demographic climate** is also in flux, as immigrant populations are transforming the makeup of our cities and towns, our aging population is exploding, and legislatures and municipalities across the country are debating the efficacy of civil unions. The Rocky Mountain States are the most urban and fastest growing region of the U.S. And, we are becoming more diverse. In Salt Lake City, 56 percent of our students are ethnic minorities, and 38 percent of our student's native language is not English. More than 85 languages are spoken in the Salt Lake City School District.

Many people (including myself) do not view the emergent transformation of our social, demographic and political climates as negative forces, but rather as welcoming changes. It is true that coping with the mounting global climate, energy, and economic pressures will be one of the government's biggest challenges. But it is also true that these challenges present opportunities for innovation, creativity, and positive change.

As President Obama's chief-of-staff Rahm Emanuel counsels, "Never let a serious crisis go to waste." In Emanuel's opinion, the challenges we are facing today present opportunities to do things we couldn't or wouldn't — do before. Speaking on the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act as a means to transform the economy, President Obama noted, "We have a once-in-a-generation chance to act boldly and turn adversity into opportunity."

As an American Civilization major in college, I recall a class discussion on our country's democratic process of checks and balances — a process that is designed to be deliberative and can often move slowly and deter rapid change. Our professor focused on the exception to protracted change: When there is a crisis that affects a vast majority of people, like the Civil War or the Great Depression, great change is swiftly set in motion.

As documented in Don Fabun's *The Dynamics of Change*, the only way for a substantive, major change to take place is for an outside accelerator to break loose. Change requires vision, collaboration, and leadership, and it can generate new opportunities.

As our energy demands increase, our economy wanes, and the impacts of global warming become more evident, we may be seeing a convergence of forces that will allow for major strides toward sustainable practices across a range of disciplines: business, land use, building, and transportation. For example:

- Many major U.S. companies that would have balked one year ago at legislation to limit greenhouse gas emissions are now advocating climate legislation and better regulation. As with most new programs, an initial concern is cost. In the 1970s and 1980s, as early environmental regulations were promulgated, industry considered environmental staff as expensive overhead. It didn't take long, though, to realize that by streamlining processes and finding ways to reduce waste and minimize emissions, meeting environmental regulations

actually created cost savings for companies. We are now in the same position with climate change; by addressing our dependence on fossil fuels and the great potential of alternative energy, we are taking advantage of the opportunity to increase our efficiency, save money, and improve our air quality as an additional benefit.

- As we begin to rebuild America and improve and secure our infrastructure, green building standards will influence new technologies, new design and new materials; renovating older buildings gives us the opportunity to provide healthy living and work spaces, and make them energy efficient, with upgrades quickly paid for through efficiencies.
- Our growing energy consumption and urban sprawl that contribute to climate change, coupled with economically trying times, are compelling transportation alternatives and innovations in sustainable community development. These forces can cultivate high-growth services and industries for our cities, reduce traffic and foster higher quality living.

The traditional forces of resistance and narrow vision will invariably persist.

In Salt Lake City, two of our biggest neighborhood issues this past year point to how difficult change can be. (Salt Lake City, contrary to commonly held assumptions, is as progressive a city as any in the country. Our community embraces mass transit, bike paths, progressive social equality and justice agendas, sustainability practices, and natural resource preservation.) Yet in the past year, when the power company attempted to upgrade its transmission system to handle increased power demand caused by the same residents who were fighting transmission line upgrades, local war broke out. Similarly, as the power company tries to upgrade its century-old substation, neighbors are rising up in revolution. Some of the opposition can be attributed to the failure of the power company to adequately mitigate impacts. But, there is an underlying NIMBY sentiment that fails to assume personal and community responsibility.

These conflicts illustrate people's reluctance to accept personal responsibility for their energy consumption. Fortunately, broad policies aimed at sustainable energy practices are increasingly being adopted. In this respect, it may be this era of crisis that finally compels a long awaited mix of changing policy direction and individual responsibility.

- In the Salt Lake Valley, as elsewhere throughout the country, urban sprawl and population growth have dictated our need for higher, more efficient transportation capacity. For many years, auto-centric development spurred highway and road construction and discouraged mass transit. Salt Lake City's 115-mile streetcar system was eliminated in 1941. Today, we are responding with sustainable planning strategies, transit-oriented developments, light rail lines, and implementation (or should I say, reintroduction) of streetcars. Salt Lake City has emerged as a national leader in transit development. After two successful light rail lines and a new, 40-mile commuter rail line in the last eight years, Utah voters have increased their transit taxes to build 70 miles of rail in the next seven years. And, in the next couple of years we will start streetcar development in Salt Lake City.

- Also in Salt Lake City, we are in the process of developing what may be the first comprehensive sustainability ordinance in the country – with the help of Chris Duerksen and Clarion Associates. With sufficient planning direction, we have gone straight into implementation, and have completed the first phase, which was to review city documents and define the areas of sustainability most important to us. In the second phase, almost completed, we are reviewing our land-use ordinances and determining where they need to be amended to meet our desired sustainability goals. The third phase will be to prioritize these changes, and have our consultant assist us with the highest priority ordinance rewrites. This will go through an ongoing public process leading to adoption by our Planning Commission and City Council. We are also measuring sustainability projects both our internal and community carbon footprints, so we can determine how effective our practices are. Here is a list of some of the changes we are considering to our ordinances to meet our sustainability goals:

- Establish landscape design standards that minimize water use and the use of pesticides and herbicides, and direct tree planting for energy benefits.
- Allow use of grey water and cisterns.
- Allow an increase in density to take advantage of mobility/mass transit, particularly around transportation nodes.
- Allow for park strips where bus benches are located to have a different type of surface (perhaps pavers) to make it more comfortable for the transit rider.
- Design infrastructure, like curb and gutter, to provide for recapture of storm water.

Require that large developments / parks/ commercial nodes have bus stops with bus shelters.

- Re-examine the way existing parking requirements are calculated; the quantity of parking spaces should be adequate to support demand but reflect opportunities for reducing automobile trips. Parking requirements could vary by geographic area and proximity to transit.
- Require less vehicle parking in exchange for providing access to bicycle lanes and trails, showers, covered and secured bicycle storage to encourage alternative transportation.
- Encourage locally-based or home-based businesses to reduce or eliminate the need to commute.
- Encourage more density in large houses originally built for single-family dwellings in MF zoning districts, while discouraging the demolition of existing structures.

- Allow a density bonus when renewable energy is used to power additional units.
- Work within the context of our historic preservation standards to allow for solar panels and wind turbines.
- Require solar orientation in subdivision design.
- Allow for greater building height/increased density in certain districts if certain alternative energy sources are used; relax building and zoning codes for adaptive reuse of buildings.
- Allow alley ways to be converted to community gardens instead of being vacated; allow low-cost garden plots in all city parks or on school grounds.
- Require the salvaging of materials in the demolition ordinance (and any other ordinance relating to demolition).

And, in other sustainability actions:

- Salt Lake City has completed a comprehensive analysis of our carbon footprint, enabling us to look at each department and division by type of energy used, and determine where we can make the most economical changes to reduce our footprint. This information will also be used to report our emissions to the Climate Registry carbon reporting system.
- We have completed the first round of comprehensive building audits to find ways to improve the energy efficiency in city facilities. These findings will be used to implement projects that will be paid for by future energy savings.
- We are midway through an audit of our fleet to determine not only if we have the right size of vehicles running on the right fuel, but to also determine where we can eliminate the use of vehicles altogether. Alternatives being considered include the use of public transportation, bikes, car-share programs and Segways. We are rapidly moving our fleet to alternative fuel, hybrid, and electric vehicles.
- We will be starting a permeable pavement test project this spring.
- Sustainability requires the availability of local goods. We are partnering with various community garden groups to promote locally grown foods, and to teach citizens how to raise their own vegetables. We also support local businesses and farmer's markets.
- Our recycling program now accepts a large variety of recyclable materials, and we started our green waste collection program last year. Our goal is to divert 50 percent of residential waste from the landfill by 2015.

- Our e2 Business Program has become a model for others across the nation. E2 stands for “environmentally and economically” sustainable businesses; we provide assistance to the businesses to find and measure environmental efficiencies, hold periodic networking functions, and place e2 advertisements in local publications. In return, not only do businesses become more sustainable; their employees take these lessons home to their families and friends.
 - In transportation, we are investing in streetcar and light rail development, doubling our bike lanes, following a complete streets model, expanding trail systems, and teaming with other communities and the Utah Transit Authority on a wide range of projects.
- The economic challenges and demographic changes in our region are actually providing unprecedented opportunities for metropolitan interests to play leadership roles as the Recovery package and new federal legislation are implemented. As mayor, I have been fortunate to meet with President Obama and members of his administration to discuss how stimulus dollars can be effectively spent at the city level and how cities – as agents of change – can establish progressive, sustainable policies that can be adopted throughout the surrounding region. The President, his cabinet, and his senior advisors have made it very clear to me and other mayors that they see our present circumstances as an opportunity to establish bold, creative, sustainable solutions. Look for a Livable Communities Initiative to formally emerge soon from the Obama Administration.
 - In Salt Lake City, we are engaging our residents, helping them recognize that while the City, the region— and Washington — can take steps toward a sustainable future, government efforts are ineffectual if residents themselves don’t take action. Government alone can’t change bad habits.

Upon entering office I initiated an effort we call Salt Lake Solutions, modeled after a successful endeavor in Oregon. Through a facilitated, consensus-based process, we delegate decision making to stakeholders and users affected by particular issues. In our latest initiative, Governor Huntsman, Salt Lake County Mayor Peter Corroon and I, empowered a group of governmental, business, and citizen interests to find a way to improve air quality in the Salt Lake Valley through citizen-based action. The group concluded that reducing vehicle miles traveled (or VMT’s) by single-occupant vehicles is the key to meeting this goal. And the group has concluded that educating residents and businesses is the most important step toward achieving VMT reduction. We are embarking on a series of measures, from public information campaigns, to employer challenges of VMT reduction, and school programs to reduce air pollution. One effort, “Turn Your Key, Be Idle Free,” is already yielding results. Many more activities are starting. I’m excited to see if we can make a difference through personal responsibility and action.

Working Together for Change – and a Sustainable Future

Surmounting our challenges, capitalizing on current conditions that serve as catalysts for change, and achieving a sustainable future – a future secured by economic, energy, environmental and social sustainability – demand the efforts of everyone – the public, the private and the individual sectors.

Ron Molen, a Salt Lake City architect, wrote: “Sustainability requires community, a critical ingredient....The self-centered, me-first ‘individual in society’ need[s] to be replaced by a group-oriented ‘person in the community.’ ”

Ron’s observation reminds us again, that contrary to the legend of the West as home of the individualist, the lonely cowboy and the miner, the West’s success is actually built on collective efforts.

In Utah, the Mormons settled communally, relying on the whole to build water and transportation systems in the arid region. John Wesley Powell, in his landmark 1878 report *Lands of the Arid Region of the United States* noted that the singular most significant characteristic of our region is aridity, and stated the need to organize politically along physiographic lines and work together to optimize our ability to live well in this environment.

One hundred thirty years later, we are still trying to apply that lesson.

The late author Wallace Stegner — whose centennial birthday we celebrate this year — shared the same sentiment, although he articulated it more bluntly. Stegner said:

“There are ways for people to exist in some measure of harmony with their natural surroundings, even though you might rather there be no people at all. But these ways require that we exhibit forethought and planning and aesthetic sensitivity, and they also require, particularly in this day and age, that we abandon the notion that a property owner can do anything he please with his property simply because he owns it and because that’s the way it has always been. On occasion communities have managed to figure this out before it is too late.”

Like the mid-19th century urban villages of the Intermountain West, Ron Molen continued in his essay: “a sustainable community must have a clear strategy or master plan for survival, citizens who fully comprehend the strategy, and a dogged commitment to make it work.... The sustainable community must have a strong connection with nature and the sustaining land. Its members must have a strong connection with each other.”

A recent Brookings Institution report suggests that “the time is right for regional leaders and Washington to fashion a new partnership to surmount regional challenges and assert leadership in the nation and the world.” The report identifies the southern Intermountain West – a “megapolitan” region, made up of Colorado’s Front Range, Greater Las Vegas, Northern New Mexico, Arizona’s Sun Corridor and my home, Utah’s Wasatch Front – as the most urban region in the country. Today we have an opportunity to put the stimulus dollars to work and model the best sustainable practices for our friends in other regions throughout the nation.

The Intermountain West – our megapolitan region – is poised for innovation and leadership in these trying times. We can glean from our past and the strength of our communities, and build on our heritage for a uniquely sustainable Western future.

Let me end with a final quote from Wallace Stegner, whom I consider the greatest observer and writer of and about the American West: “When the West fully learns that cooperation, not rugged individualism, is the quality that most characterizes and preserves it, then it will have achieved itself and outlived its origins. Then it has a chance to create a society to match its scenery.”

As planners and land-use professionals we have a special role to play in this transformational time. Sometimes I think planners take for granted our knowledge and power. We know good decision making processes and the forces of change. We understand how to help a community see and realize its vision for a sustainable future.

As professionals, we must not be shy; we need to be forward-looking and opportunistic. Our communities, our region, and our nation are looking to our skills and abilities as never before. I hope you will take advantage of this opportunity and help accelerate innovation and creativity, and to help usher in a new era.

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