



BY CRAIG MALIN, ICMA-CM

NEXT GENERATION SUSTAINABILITY

For the future, don't be constrained by the past

In a 2007 resolution, ICMA members affirmed their commitment to building sustainable communities, referencing the ancient Athenian Oath to “transmit this city, not only not less, but greater and more beautiful, than it was transmitted to us.” Five years have passed, and the evidence strongly suggests we have not been successful, particularly with passing on what was provided to us, in some measure greater than we received it.

To whom, exactly, are we—local government managers—supposed to transmit the communities where we occupy leadership positions? Developers? Bankers? Property owners? The citizens who elect our bosses? The next city manager or county administrator who replaces us?

This is the rather mundane reality that too many in the profession accept. Although this approach may pay the bills, it is not the stuff of legend, worthy of an ancient oath that inspires a noble profession.

Our profession is more than that. Our profession comes with an obligation to truly, transformatively transmit the communities of which we are the stewards to

a higher purpose. For clarity about why we are obliged to transmit our community, my suggestion is to visit a park, a school, or a juvenile detention center.

We work for kids.

While we respect and honor the past, we work for the future. Managers work for the next generation. We work to pass on our community's collective social capital, in ever-increasing increments, to those who haven't yet thought about voting or paying taxes.

We work for those who see the world as it can and should be, rather than how it is or was. We work for kids. When we do our jobs well, kids have more social capital and more opportunities for brighter, greater, and more beautiful futures. Plus, our communities prosper with personal, intergenerational sustainability.

Supposed to Be, But Isn't

That is how it is supposed to work, but it hasn't of late. The latest U.S. census data indicate 21.6 percent of American children live in poverty. America has more impoverished children today, 16.4 million,

than it has ever had, and the number continues to rise in the postrecession era.

Of the 3,142 counties in the nation, 653 counties saw significant increases in poverty for children ages 5 to 17 from 2007 to 2010. Only eight counties saw a decrease. Childhood poverty, hunger, poor health, and social disconnection have lifelong consequences, constrain individual potential, and limit the success of nations and the communities within them.

Public education, that time-tested path from poverty, has been similarly hard-pressed. In 1970, America led the world in high school and college graduation. Today, we are 21st in high school completion and 15th in college completion. Every day, more than 7,200 high school students drop out.

For the class that entered high school in 2007, the national graduation rate stands at 68.8 percent. The typical high school dropout loses \$260,000 in reduced earnings over a lifetime. Dropouts' aggregate, cumulative costs to communities and the nation in reduced earnings and in increased public expenses is crippling, with every four-year cohort of

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Asking Your Police and Fire Chiefs the Right Questions to Get the Right Answers

- **June 11** Washington, DC

APPLICATION DEADLINES

- **June 30** Leadership ICMA icma.org/LEAD
- **July 1** Credentialing Program



ICMA
98th ANNUAL CONFERENCE
PHOENIX
Maricopa County
OCTOBER 7-10, 2012

IMPORTANT DATES

- **June 18** Registration and Housing Opens
- **July 27** First Registration Deadline
- **September 7** Second Registration Deadline

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IN THE DAILY EFFORT TO LEAD LOCAL GOVERNMENTS, DON'T BE WHOLLY CONSUMED BY THE MINUTIAE OF THE PRESENT. BY ALL MEANS, DON'T BE CONSTRAINED BY THE PAST. FOCUS ON THE FUTURE.

high school dropouts costing taxpayers a trillion dollars over their lifetimes.

If you think that poverty is the purview of priests and that education is the province of principals, you're wrong. Unmet social needs that compromise your community's future are your problem. They demand the community's full attention, and they require sustainable solutions founded on inclusive engagement and earnest, ethical, nonpartisan problem solving that is our profession's stock in trade.

All the green roofs, all the LED streetlights, and all the metallic flavors of LEED-certified buildings absolutely pale in comparison to a committed focus on building social capital for the next generation. That is sustainability.

Committed and Involved

Local government leaders need to break out of narrow, tradition-bound lanes, for the status quo of slow decline is, assuredly, not sustainable. We need to challenge mediocrity, confront inaction, and call out phrases like "the new normal" for what they are: weak-willed excuses of the comfortably lethargic.

We need to support partners wherever they may be found in pursuit of improving the lives of children as a fundamental, measurable community goal. We need to personally commit and be personally involved, both to have a tangibly informed perspective and to be credible in our unabashed expectation that everyone has a role to play in our community's brighter future.

We need to listen to children and empower them with our time and willing spirit. Children should be an integral part of community planning efforts. They should play a role on boards and commissions. They should review

our operations, suggest changes, and expect that those suggestions be taken seriously. They should be encouraged to challenge us with their dreams as they inspire us with their pluck.

You should expect raised eyebrows from the cynical. You should expect pushback and even some sharp elbows from those who want you back in your narrow lane. But you should also expect success, as innovative ideas spring forth and transformative relationships are forged.

The fact is that community involvement works. Linking local and social services to schools works. Building collaboration among teachers, parents, and community members works. Making schools the center of a community's energy and progress works.

Involvement at the personal level also works. Mentors can cut illegal drug use and school truancy and dropout rates in half (Big Brothers Big Sisters, http://www.bbbs.org/site/c.9iILI3NGKhK6F/b.7721455/k.6CBF/Our_impact_on_education.htm) and reduce pregnancy rates for at-risk teens (Claire Brindis and Laura Davis, Linking Pregnancy Prevention to Youth Development, <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/storage/advfy/documents/communitiesresponding5.pdf>). Taking responsibility for connecting kids to a brighter future works.

In the daily effort to lead local governments, don't be wholly consumed by the minutiae of the present. By all means, don't be constrained by the past. Focus on the future. The essence of sustainability is our children, well prepared to shape our future. **PM**



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