

by Rick Cole

“Think Globally, Act Locally” Tackling the Global Urban Challenge One Community at a Time

“We are the premier association of professional local government leaders building sustainable communities to improve lives worldwide.”

—VISION STATEMENT, 2008 ICMA STRATEGIC PLAN

Our profession was born out of urban crisis a century ago. Now our profession has the opportunity to rise to the challenge of today’s *global* urban crisis.

In 1904, Lincoln Steffens wrote *The Shame of the Cities*, a shocking expose of the corruption and mismanagement of machine politics. It sparked a wave of civic reform, including the introduction of professional management in American local government.

Today, no one book has captured the imagination of our diverse world, but works like *Planet of Slums* by Mike Davis and *Hot, Flat, and Crowded* by Thomas Friedman detail the staggering dimensions of our urban challenge, and the wrenching changes the global economic crisis will exact on all of us.

For the first time in human history, a majority of humans now live in cities, a shift that’s rapidly accelerating. Cities now house 3.2 billion of the world population of 6.4 billion. By 2030, cities will be home to nearly 5 billion of the planet’s projected 8 billion population.

This exploding urban growth is greater than today's population of the United States and China combined! There has never been change this big and this fast in all of human history. Americans have been as removed from this population tidal wave as we were from the 2004 tsunami that killed 225,000 people in 11 countries. But the speed and impact of the meltdown in global financial markets brings home how interconnected we are with the rest of the planet.

We now know that America's standard of consumption is unsustainable. Because if everyone lived like Americans, we'd need five planets. To finance it, we've been borrowing \$2 billion a day for years from the rest of the world. The resulting financial crash echoes Stein's Law, coined by economist Herb Stein: "Things that can't go on forever, don't." We face a long readjustment to a "one planet" way of living. As Worldwatch Institute President Christopher Flavin notes, "Continued human progress now depends on an economic transformation that is more profound than any seen in the last century . . . our economy is dependent on the broader ecosystem that contains it."

Of course, as a working city manager, I recognize our individual limitations. Just managing our own organizational and community challenges can often seem overwhelming. But "thinking globally, acting locally" isn't about changing the world. It's about changing ourselves. We don't have to take on the staggering responsibility of building and managing cities in places like India and Indonesia. We simply have to do our jobs recognizing there is only one planet, not five.

How do we do this? Our ingrained mind-sets and habits make it hard to even know where to begin. But that's the point. The place to begin is with our ingrained mind-sets and habits. What we need is a global context for our local responsibilities—becoming "g/local" in our outlook.

With a debt to Stephen Covey, let me suggest "Seven Habits of *Glocal*

City Managers," for those who embody ICMA's current motto of "leaders at the heart of communities" and embrace our new strategic vision to "improve lives worldwide."

1. Be proactive. Yes, this is Covey's first principle, and it fits. Gandhi advocated that we "be the change we want to see in the world." That means setting a personal example of a one-planet lifestyle. That doesn't mean coming to work in a loincloth made of cotton thread we spin at home. But it does mean "walking the walk" of a more sustainable standard of living especially in these leaner times.



Al Gore got in trouble for jetting around the world preaching against climate change while living in an energy-guzzling home. One symbolic but significant indicator is how we get to work (walk, bike, drive a hybrid, or pull up in a city-purchased SUV). More fundamentally, as leaders, we must demonstrate our own willingness to change.

2. Begin with the end in mind. Item two on the Covey list. Few agenda reports go to council without examining the short-term budgetary impact of a decision. Why not also consider the long-term sustainability of our actions? How about measuring our practices by this standard: could the entire world do exactly the same thing?

For instance, we take for granted that protecting order in a community is best achieved by officers constantly patrolling our communities in vehicles that get about four miles to the gallon. Can we afford this as a global standard? The Mohawk tribal confederacy is said to have weighed decisions based on their impact over seven generations. Why should we be more short-sighted?

3. Put first things first. Unless we find another one, our common planetary home must come first. Cities are now the primary human habitat, so local decisions have global implications. Pursuing sustainability, of course, is not confined to what we call environmental issues. The United Nations definition rightly gives equal consideration to economics and social equity. But how does a commitment to global sustainability apply to tonight's planning commission hearing or next month's council budget workshop?

Simply asking that question is a good start. It's myopic to consider a tract map for new development—and widening a highway to accommodate the traffic it generates—without measuring that decision against a comprehensive strategic vision that considers concerns ranging from climate change to community health. That doesn't mean paralysis by analysis; it means making short-run decisions with the long view in mind.

4. Think win-win. We all pay lip service to this ideal, even if local politics is still dominated by the "I win—you lose" mentality. But should we allow turf battles and polarization to flourish inside our own organizations? Most planners now support narrower streets to calm traffic, make walking and biking safer, and reduce urban heat effect and stormwater pollution. Yet, firefighters fear they will slow emergency response.

Instead of choosing sides, in Ventura we recently conducted an elaborate two-agency emergency drill on a newly constructed "skinny street." We

took an inclusive view of both safety and sustainability. As a result, planners and firefighters now agree on narrower streets that incorporate turnouts to accommodate emergency response.

Such successes aren't as glamorous as pledges to cut greenhouse gas emissions. But leading our communities in a more sustainable direction is less about grand gestures and more about old-fashioned goodwill, hard work, and common sense.

5. Seek understanding of the larger framework. This differs a bit from Covey's phrasing, but here's the point: It isn't what we know or even what we don't know that hurts us, it's what we don't know that we don't know. Unfortunately, Americans are stunningly parochial—and never more so than when they show up at a public hearing about, say, an affordable housing project in their own neighborhood. Management professionals aren't in a position to preach, especially to an irate crowd of voters. That's why it's important to anticipate these situations by convening citizens to participate in framing a larger vision.

We all know that “public hearings are that place in American government where no one listens,” as former Missoula mayor Dan Kemmis wryly put it. Of course, the alternative of engaging, educating, and listening to our citizens takes time and patience and, like you, I often find myself too busy doing my job to remember that democracy is the most important part of my job. But the alternative to thinking globally, acting locally is thinking parochially and acting “loco.”

6. Create new models. This isn't on Covey's list but derives from a brilliant paper written by author Bruce Elkins in 2001 called “The Challenge of Sustainability: A Structural Approach to Creating Sustainable Businesses.”

Elkins notes, “There is a profound and fundamental difference between problem solving and creating. By problem solving, I mean focusing on what we don't like and don't want, and taking action to get rid of it. By creating,

I mean focusing on what we truly *do* want, and taking action to bring it into being—regardless of problems, circumstances, or current capacity.”

Ironically, a hundred years ago, managers were bold innovators who virtually invented everything we now take for granted, from capital budgets to public bidding. We remain largely wedded to their legacy, even as technology and demography are transforming private industry.

I'm not talking about management fads or gimmicks like a new name and logo for your public works department. But the examples of our own airline, steel, and auto industries should underscore the perils of

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complacency. If unlikely places like Curitiba, Brazil, can be global innovators in urban sustainability, what is holding us back?

7. Sharpen the saw. Here we're back on familiar Covey ground. It may sound trite, but travel really does broaden your horizons. Accompanying my wife on a public health tour of China last year, I was disappointed to find we were skipping Shanghai to go to someplace called Shenzhen. On our arrival, I learned the astonishing fact that this manufacturing powerhouse had a population in 1980 of just 25,000.

Today, Shenzhen has a population of 11 million. Even more astonishing than the scale of growth is its character. Yes, there are bleak industrial landscapes as far as the eye can see. But there are also thriving middle class districts that could teach American developers some useful lessons about designing pedestrian

and bike-friendly mixed-use development. Then, this year, we took our family to both Dubai and Cairo. In the oil-rich United Arab Emirates we saw the world's largest assemblage of skyscrapers under construction (some 2,000 rising out of the desert, including the world's tallest).

In population-rich Egypt, we saw cemetery crypts turned into affordable housing, along with vast swaths of four- and five-story concrete buildings all built without regard for either property ownership or official permitting. These encounters with urban challenges abroad powerfully drive home the lesson of the Arab proverb: “I felt sorry that I had no shoes until I met a man who had no feet.”

In his famous speech to white South African students in the days of apartheid, Robert Kennedy prophetically challenged their complacency and complicity in an unjust and unsustainable social order. “There is a Chinese curse which says ‘May he live in interesting times.’ Like it or not, we live in interesting times. They are times of danger and uncertainty; but they are also the most creative of any time in the history of mankind. And everyone here will ultimately be judged—will ultimately judge himself—on the effort he has contributed to building a new world society and the extent to which his ideals and goals have shaped that effort.”

As local government managers, we too are prone to “the temptation to follow the easy and familiar path of personal ambition and financial success” that Kennedy also warned against. But as managers, we are sworn to “a deep sense of social responsibility as a trusted public servant” under our ICMA Code of Ethics. We live in interesting times—on a hot, flat, and crowded planet. The decisions we make and the example we set is our footprint on the sands of time. It's a footprint we shouldn't take lightly. **PM**

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