

**OCL Study Session  
Toward a Sustainable Syracuse and Onondaga County  
Sept. 29, 2009**

**Presenters:** Sam Gordon, owner of Plan-It and project scientist, Onondaga Environmental Institute; SUNY-ESF professors Emanuel Carter (landscape architecture) and Richard Smardon (environmental studies)

**Sam Gordon—**

Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain, is a compact urban city surrounded by a greenbelt system—

- Greenbelts provide a framework for controlling urban growth patterns; can provide alternative transportation, recreational system for urban regions, and create a connective web of parks and open space that also supports regional wildlife, trees and plants.

Vitoria-Gasteiz population today is more than 230,000, with rapid growth in the last 50-60 years. 81 percent live within 1500 meters of city center, 95 percent live within 500 meters of basic services—school, work, etc. Accessibility was created by design—a commitment to creating situations where people could walk to basic services. City is still experiencing growth, and greenbelt area is being negotiated into that, with parks and open spaces created.

Greenbelt creates a green ring around the city. Outside the ring is agricultural land.

Within the ring:

- Recreational trails accessible to all and from the center of the city.
- Public bicycle system, also free and accessible to all, with distribution points for pick-up and drop-off throughout the city.
- Extensive bike-pedestrian network as well as investment in public transit, like buses and light rail. Eighty percent of daily trips are by foot, bike, or public transit—more than 70 percent are by bike or foot and 10 percent by public transit. Incredible accomplishment by any standard. Made possible only by deliberate planning; supportive environment also fosters this kind of behavior.

Flooding problems from Zadorra River:

- City re-engineered area affected by flooding, so that floodwaters would be diverted away from industrial area and instead to farmland around the city, as a benefit to farmers.
- Salburua Wetland—also created to help control storm water and flooding. Area also supports migratory birds and has become a prime bird-watching site. Salburua Wetland focuses on native plants, which increase capacity of wetland to hold water. Introduced deer herd, tended by a farmer, to keep native vegetation under control. Wetland also has become a habitat for European mink, an endangered species.

Next projects are focusing on a series of regional protected open spaces, analyzing existing open spaces and unique areas they want to preserve. Also expanding concept to larger region, and how to create connections throughout Central Southern Europe.

**Here in CNY**—Unlike compactness of Vitoria-Gasteiz, Upstate New York suffers from sprawl, and the worst rate of sprawl is in Central New York.

- Despite slow population growth, CNY between 1982 and 1997 saw a 30 percent increase in urbanized land (resulting in a 32 percent decline in density).
- Virtually no growth management strategy in place.
- Onondaga Greenbelt—Working with the Center for Urban and Regional Applied Research at Le Moyne College and the Onondaga Environmental Institute to develop a greenbelt within Onondaga County. Exploring possibilities for regional and urban growth management. Also looking at regional parks and open spaces—Where do we have existing parks, vacant land, etc. In preliminary stages of mapping connections between those systems to see what kind of network we could develop.

**Emanuel Carter—**

**Vitoria-Gasteiz efforts:**

- All done by design—consciously worked out by analysis, planning, design, and then legislation. A specific set of values at work in creating healthy ecosystem. Agenda 21 and other accords create framework for setting objectives and goals for urban and regional planning.
- Quality of the landscape is tied to the culture—desire to maintain landscape within city in a way that would be recognizable by ancestors.
- Community centers with bicycles, educational possibilities, recreational facilities. Elevating general level of population across the board is a social goal. Community gardens. Dedicated bike lanes (and not ones that double as parking spaces).
- Ag, forestry boundaries, waterways have to be maintained in certain condition.
- Natural processes used for nourishing air, soil, and water, providing biodiversity.
- Very attractive to developers—a lot of people want to live in that environment.
- Detailed records kept on condition of all ecosystems and consequences of damage to them. Use measurable standards—air quality, water quality, biodiversity, soil quality, popular satisfaction with environment, ie. Social satisfaction is a major goal.

**In Syracuse and Onondaga County:**

- Have to decide what we want to be about—that we want to live in a way that preserves quality of landscapes. Can't let market decide.
- When build in room for bikes, vegetation, walking—behaviors change.
- Need analysis of state of ecosystems throughout county and data on why they matter.

We don't want to "become" Vitoria-Gasteiz. Rather, we need to make kinds of decisions, go through citizen processes that they went through. Setting goals, visioning, adopting standards for reaching those goals. Nothing came about casually.

**Richard Smardon—**

**Why do comprehensive planning?**

- Growth control
- Concerned about public health and safety
- Biodiversity protection
- Recreational access

- Preserve community character
- Promote sustainable economic development

Today, we've moved away from single-purpose comprehensive planning for land use and toward multiple-purpose planning, considering range of issues. Tying everything back together. Now much more participatory process, from grassroots up.

### **What is smart growth?**

- Ensures that development serves economy, community, and environment.
- Provides framework for community to make informed decisions about how and where to grow.
- Directs development toward existing communities.
- Preserves open space, farmland, green infrastructures.
- Provides mixed land use (residential as well as business/retail) rather than separated. In the past, zoning was used to separate different land uses; now looking for combination, even within same structures.
- Takes advantage of compact building design; fewer people commuting, and shorter commutes.
- Fosters distinctive, attractive places and sense of place.
- Walkable neighborhoods.
- Variety of transportation sources.
- Diversified housing options.
- Encourages community and stakeholder collaboration.
- Makes development decisions predictable and cost-effective.

### **Sustainability Planning:**

- Combines social, economic and environmental concerns—triple bottom line. Too much planning is driven by economics.
- Multiple-generation perspective—get away from short-term decisions. Sustainability is about thinking long-term.
- Active participation of all stakeholders. Agenda 21 process for local planning is all about participation.

Local sustainability must be a step-by-step process driven by local needs and concerns. Local Agenda 21 does not specify what local plans should include. Also need continuity from one administration to the next.

Working with city of Syracuse for last three years to figure out current and long-term worth of city's standing trees in terms of carbon storage and total biomass—

Open space planning process/guide—NYS guide for local open space planning—downloadable free off Internet—

Regional examples of Smart Growth planning activities:

- Onondaga County Settlement Plan—introduced in late 1990s. Looks at city and surrounding hamlets, what features are important to preserve, and how to do that. Available on the web.
- Genesee County Smart Growth Plan
- Tompkins County Greenhouse Gas Plan

Smart Growth inventory would include:

- Data on land development/infrastructure
- Mapping of water, wetlands, watersheds, floodplains
- Data on flora, fauna, habitats
- Recreational facilities and usage
- Historical, cultural and aesthetic landscape data

Elements of Smart Growth Planning:

- Avoiding future hazards: flooding damage, water quality issues, regional climate change and extreme weather events, Great Lakes water level
- Protecting resources—agricultural land, water resources, valuable wildlife habitats
- Control over unwanted land use/facilities—ie., nuclear power plant, waste areas—
- Encouraging sustainable economic development—long-term employment, tourism, etc.

Financial tools to promote smart growth—acquisition of fees, voluntary easements, etc., taxation policies—ie., ag districts, forest tax law, local reduced assessments, local regulatory zoning. Much of this is already in place. A variety of local and federal/state funding sources to buy land.

North American greenways—a lot of activity around creeks and open-space greenways throughout US. Features of greenways:

- Connect open space and habitat
- Multi-modal transportation
- Aesthetics and recreation
- Air and water quality maintenance
- Urban climate amelioration
- Support from government and private land trusts
- Local example—**Onondaga Creek revitalization plan**—in process of review right now. Plan for creek revitalization combines economic, social, environmental issues. Envisions the functions we want to protect and then build into an implementation plan. Onondaga Nation is partner with them—interested in stewardship with land.

Land trusts—Valuable tool. Don't have to always use public dollars. Take land and give tax write-offs to owners as result of that.

- Local example—**CNY Land Trust**—Preserves 2,500 acres thru Onondaga County and Oswego County through either donations or purchase of private land. Can use these lands as well as public areas in constructing a greenbelt or green infrastructure plan.

Summary: Sustainable smart growth strategies and green infrastructure are the future and can be combined with efforts to reduce greenhouse gases. The tools and resources are available for communities willing to pursue.