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Shaping the future of Southern Nevada conference key points

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**SOME REFLECTIONS ABOUT THE OCTOBER 24, 2007
UNLV SUSTAINABILITY CONFERENCE**

**Ron Smith, Founding Executive Director
UNLV Urban Sustainability Initiatives**

The green movement and other sustainability efforts now beginning in Las Vegas, as well as many other cities, are in large part due to necessity. We are challenged by the need for clean and sufficient quantities of water, a shortage of affordable housing, increased demand and costs of energy, the loss of citizen involvement in our civic affairs, increased traffic, threats to our personal security ranging from criminals and gangs to the possibility of contagious diseases, absence of medical insurance for many, the continuing need for economic resiliency, complaints about public education, problems of air pollution, and of course the list goes on.

In a sense, sustainability as a movement is a product of crisis. Some crises, of course, are more immediate and real than others, but all are important to the people who are directly affected. Recurring themes in the sessions were: A sense of immediacy for action, sound research on which we could make important decisions, working together as opposed to operating in silos, imaginative and entrepreneurial solutions, and feasible action plans that would then improve the quality of life now and for the future.

The term "social sustainability" was widely used throughout the day, and while hard to define, the concept has to do with our attitudes, values, and actual practices that will assist people in meeting their needs. It addresses such key questions as, "do our citizens, do our leaders, truly have an interest in and dedication to the community, State, and region?" It simply asks, "Do people care about where they live?" Indicators of social sustainability might be the amount of support provided to public education, how we treat abandoned children, the availability of parks and other public places, the support we provide for our healthcare system, the treatment of the homeless, and the

quality of facilities for the aged. A key element of social sustainability has to do with matters of social justice.

The entire concept of social sustainability leads to the question, “Do we have the will to create a sustainable community?” While we may have the financial capital and technical expertise to meet many community problems, what is sometimes overlooked are a number of challenges, including incredible growth with a mixture of approximately 5,000 newcomers moving to Las Vegas each month, residents who on the average have lived here only 13 years, and some who reside in Las Vegas only part-time. One might well conclude that such a new population base would hold little in common and perhaps have only marginal commitment, much less understanding, of the history and culture of our community and state. Thus, it seems that in the given absence of social bonds among some citizens we must then rely on our educational system and the media to inform citizens and on our political leaders to exercise the will and provide the resources to bring about change.

Related to this idea of “will,” can our leaders make smart decisions about the allocation of scarce resources? Who can we look to for leadership? Will it be the mayors, city councils, county commissioners, directors and experts in our public agencies, the Governor, the legislature, business leaders? These are daunting questions about which I heard little or no discussion during the day. One resounding theme that was voiced among the 400 attendees, however, was that the continuation and survival of community and state sustainability rests on our having a sense of and dedication to where we live – our home – our community – our state – our region – our world.

Also mentioned in various ways was the idea that there is both a synergy and tension among environmental, economic, and social sustainability. All three are interrelated and must be delicately balanced, but of course at times they are in

opposition. In the latter case, in an earlier time business essentially found environmental sustainability a hindrance to doing business and social sustainability not the responsibility of business. I heard nothing during the day that would indicate such a sentiment today. Many businesses now see profit in bringing green products and services to the marketplace and efficiencies in energy and water costs in LEEDTM-certified buildings. A business going green is generally seen today as simply “good business.” Also, there is a growing sense of social responsibility by businesses to invest in the quality of life of their communities. Businesses realize they need a qualified workforce that the local schools should provide and that affordable housing must exist to attract and retain their workers. The old disconnects among economic, environmental, and social/cultural sustainability seem to be quickly fading.

So, where do we go from here? The conference evaluations indicated a high level of satisfaction with the guest speakers and panels, with the only consistent criticism being that there was simply not enough time for audience participation. Agreed. Our advisory group is considering several ideas for an April 2008 conference, such as having mayors of three major Western cities tell us about their successes and failures in creating community sustainability plans. It is interesting to note that 11 out of the 12 top cities for sustainability are located on the West coast. Presentations from these individuals would become a valuable prelude for a visioning session next fall. Meanwhile, UNLV will continue its many research projects and developing its educational programs that inform about sustainability. For all who attended – the guest speakers, moderators, panelists, volunteers, and organizers – a huge thanks!