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Focus

Catching the Green Wave

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Like the “butterfly effect,” which posits that a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil could trigger a tornado in Texas, climate change is the first global environmental issue in that the impacts of greenhouse gas emissions are not localized — a carbon dioxide release in California affects temperature in Bangladesh, for instance. Duly alarmed over the projected disastrous worldwide impacts of climate change, a true shift in the environmental regulatory paradigm is occurring, a shift that looks to prevent a future cataclysmic environmental event and move us toward a proactive precautionary approach toward protecting our diminishing natural resources and preventing irreversible environmental harm.

Climate change has: compelled states, the federal government and the international community to pass laws and attempt to reach, or strong-arm consensus on needed actions to curb global warming and shifted strategies in regards to land use and development with a focus on “smart growth” sustainability in order to reduce the urban sprawl that has led to an explosion in single-occupancy vehicle travel.

As evidence grows that the business community is responding to a “greener” public by shifting its manner of corporate environmental management, recent environmental laws and regulations passed or being considered by environmentally (or politically) motivated politicians will serve to accelerate this shift. California, long at the forefront of environmental regulation, passed landmark climate change legislation in 2006 that requires massive

cuts in GHGs, and the legislation will be the engine that will drive California’s response to climate change for years to come. California law, the Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006 (AB 32), requires that California reduce its greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by the year 2020, an approximately 25 percent reduction, and requires emissions reductions from most major economic sectors. Accomplishing the emission-reduction goals of AB 32 requires looking to the past (1990 emissions) not to allocate responsibility for cleaning up past contamination, but rather as a reference point for future environmental management.

In an effort to set an example for the private sector, many local governments have turned to promoting environmental sustainability in the building and remodels of government facilities.

California is far from alone in developing new environmental regulatory programs that account for the future threat of climate change. Many states, including New Jersey, have passed similar aggressive legislation, and the international community appears to be working toward consensus on the need to curtail emissions to avoid prospective harm. The U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change recently brought the major emitting countries together (including the United States) and, though there remains significant disagreement over major items such as numerical emissions limits, the convention did produce a roadmap for future discussions. All countries agreed “deep cuts in global emissions” would be required and that “delay in reducing emissions significantly constrains opportunities to achieve lower stabilization levels and increases the risk of more severe climate change impacts.”

California’s largest cities are also becoming green. On Earth Day, April 22, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa promoted and the Los Angeles City Council adopted, a

plan to slash the city’s planet-warming greenhouse gases to 35 percent below the 1990 level by 2030, and make Los Angeles the “cleanest and greenest city in the country.” San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom has a blueprint to cut his city’s greenhouse gases to 20 percent below the 1990 level by 2012, creating “the greenest large city in the United States of America.”

Evidence of change is most pronounced in the area of land use and transportation policy, where a forward-looking paradigm will have the greatest effect on the reduction of greenhouse gases. Vehicle emissions alone account for 41 percent of California’s greenhouse gas emissions, and the number is likely consistently large in other states. For decades, local governments with virtually unfettered power have approved developments farther and farther away from jobs and urban centers, basing their decisions largely on the need to boost tax revenue in local communities. Such policies have caused Californians (and drivers in other states) to drive more and longer to meet everyday needs. If trends continue, the projected 59 percent increase in total miles driven by 2030 will overwhelm expected gains from vehicle efficiency and low-carbon fuels.

In an effort to set an example for the private sector, many local governments have turned to promoting environmental sustainability in the building and remodels of government facilities. In the United States, EPA statistics show that buildings account for 39 percent of total energy use, 12 percent of the total water consumption, 68 percent of total electricity consumption, 38 percent of the carbon dioxide emissions. In fact, many are adopting the United States Green Building Council Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) rating system when designing these facilities. LEED is the nationally accepted benchmark for the design, construction and operation of high-

performance green buildings. According to the Green Building Council, various LEED initiatives including legislation, executive orders, resolutions, ordinances, policies and incentives are found in 72 cities, 22 counties, 16 towns, 27 states, 12 federal agencies, 10 public school jurisdictions and 35 institutions of higher education across the United States.

Climate change will also force local governments to change their ways when approving new private-sector projects. They may be forced by the federal and state governments to promote smart growth in land use decisions, seeking to reduce urban sprawl and to reduce consumption of energy for cooling, heating and power generation. As noted by the Pew Center on Global Climate Change, "the achievement of significant reductions will require a major change in the way U.S. urban systems have been evolving over the past half-century." In the past, local governments have acted without restraint and in the future will be required to make smart growth decisions, forcing localities to adopt growth management plans that comport with state greenhouse gas-reduction goals.

In California, Attorney General Jerry Brown used the state's groundbreaking AB 32 global warming mitigation legislation as precedent in a now-settled lawsuit against San Bernardino County. His office is compelling the county to inventory its total greenhouse gas emissions and

to come up with a reduction action plan tied to new development, through a long-existing regulation known as the California Environmental Quality Act.

With an eye on changing local government behavior, in 2008 the California Legislature is expected to consider a bill, AB 375, which would require local transportation planning agencies to implement greenhouse gas reduction targets that will be met through local land use decisions, including decisions on approving new development projects. Though the bill faces significant opposition, it is clear that, at the very least, California is engaged in the discussion of environmental sustainability, spurred by the future threat of climate change and its potential impact on California's natural resources.

Even without federal or state mandates, more and more local governments are "warming" to the concept of sustainability, not just as a way to protect against climate change, but also because it saves money by conserving resources. As part of Villaraigosa's plan to slash Los Angeles' emissions, he signed an ordinance developed in partnership with the City Council that requires all projects at or above 50,000 square feet or 50 units to comply with the general LEED certified standard. In exchange, the city will work with builders to speed up the approval process

and remove obstacles in the municipal code for element of sustainable building design such as green rooftops, cisterns and permeable pavement. Los Angeles is not alone. Other cities throughout the nation, such as Chicago, New York and Salt Lake City, have taken dramatic steps to reduce emissions, with local politicians realizing the value of going green. Increasingly, cities with green initiatives are featured in national publications and touted for their sustainability and conservation efforts. This no doubt leads to an increase in city-wide economic development.

If we have not tipped, we are certainly teetering on a paradigm shift in both the private and public sector.

Climate change has driven consumers, private industry, politicians and governments to more proactively manage our environmental resources, changing the way we all think and behave for the better of all mankind.

Given Kyoto Prize-winning meteorologist Edward N. Lorenz's very recent death, we are reminded that he perhaps got it right here as well — that a small one-degree change in temperature can, indeed, change everything, once and for all, for a more sustainable future.

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