Draft Mission Statement

The Center for Sustainable Suburban Development will generate research and policy analyses that focus on the economic, social, planning, and ecological challenges of the suburbs. The center will employ a multi-disciplinary approach, drawing on faculty, students and researchers from the social and natural sciences, from engineering, the professions and the humanities.

The center is ideally placed because the Riverside-San Bernardino area is a hub of the new wave of American suburban and exurban development. UCR’s home region faces serious questions about planning and coordination. It lacks a central business district and is a peripheral region in a much larger metropolitan area, which limits its political and economic autonomy in solving problems. It faces these challenges in an area with remarkable ethnic diversity, significant differences in residents’ economic status and education levels and a large number of endangered plant and animal species. All these issues provide both worthy fields of academic study and opportunities for UCR to serve its home communities.

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A Beginning

On November 12, several dozen civic officials from San Bernardino and Riverside counties gathered to begin charting an agenda for the University of California Riverside’s planned Center for Sustainable Suburban Development.
With the increasing population forecast for the Inland region – 5.6 million people by 2020 – this area is likely to be the national laboratory for suburban growth issues for the next two or three decades. The social, environmental, political, educational and economic problems – the questions about traffic and infrastructure development and air quality that we face here – all these will be watched and studied around the country.

The local officials – mayors, city managers, elected representatives, planning directors, school superintendents, school board presidents and regional agency heads – came to help focus those broad issues into specific problems that an academic center could study profitably while contributing to the improvement of life in the university’s core region.

Edward Blakely was raised in San Bernardino and is a distinguished graduate of UCR. He now heads the Milano Graduate School of Management and Urban Policy at New School University in New York City. He set the tone for the day by noting that 70% of the nation’s population resides in the suburbs. And, he added, the Inland region has a particular challenge to improve both its quality of life and job opportunities because too many of the students trained by its universities leave the area after graduation.

The small group discussions focused on a number of problems. But, as Andres Soto, Colton’s Planning Director, noted, these problems and their solutions are heavily interconnected. How can we keep college graduates here without attracting the kinds of growing, technology-savvy companies young people want to work for? How can we attract such companies with our smog problems? How can we attract them without finding the massive funding needed to build transportation systems and other infrastructure to handle those extra millions of people?

For many public officials, the key problems revolved around funding mechanisms for what clearly needs to be done. The Inland region will be the state’s major growth area for the foreseeable future and that growth will inevitably call for more schools, roads, police

The Center’s planning process will culminate in a conference February 20-22 which will bring in academic experts from around the country, the state and the region. It will feature panels on local as well as national issues. Reid Ewing, author of the recent report that identified Riverside County as the sprawl capitol of the country, and regional economist John Husing will appear on one panel. We hope to have your participation in this endeavor.

The Center would like to thank Mr. Ali Sahabi of SE Corp. for his financial support of this planning process.

Edward Blakely is both the Dean of the Robert J. Milano Graduate School of Management and Urban Policy at New School University in New York City and a dean of public policy thinking in the United States. His long and distinguished career began when he entered UCR from San Bernardino High School. He is familiar with the region’s problems, and how they connect with statewide issues, from his years running the urban planning and public policy programs at USC and Cal Berkeley. Dr. Blakely is an internationally recognized scholar in urban community development, and has been a successful practitioner in strategic planning, financing, real estate development and project management. He also ran against Jerry Brown for mayor of Oakland in 1998. He serves on the National Academy of Sciences Panel on Urban Development and Transportation. He also serves as an advisor to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and to state governments in the United States, Australia, Sweden, and Japan. His books include Fortress America: Gated Communities in the United States (1997), Separate Societies: Poverty and Inequality in U.S. Cities (1992, co-authored with William Goldsmith), Planning Local Economic Development (1989), Taking Development Initiatives: Local Government’s Role in Economic Development (1986), and Rural Communities in Advanced Industrial Society (1980).
Rick Bishop, Executive Director of the Western Riverside Council of Governments suggested there was a strong need to educate the public about the problems growth will bring to the region. “There is no sense of urgency about growth,” he said. Therefore, there is no political consensus about the need for better planning. John Tooker, City Manager of Yucaipa, said the public had to develop understanding about more efficient uses of land and come to accept higher density. Steve Harding, city manager of San Jacinto, called for better education on the line between private property rights and public policy.

Brad Buller, City Planner for Rancho Cucamonga, noted that these issues have often been left to simmer until something forces them onto the public agenda. Then, they are presented to the public by politicians, whom many in the public do not trust. Marilyn Roberts, chair of Loma Linda’s Planning Commission, said that while an education process is greatly needed, it should focus on factual presentations, engaging the citizens and presenting realistic alternatives so people do not think they are being manipulated. Summed up Enrique Acuna of Assemblyman John Longville’s office, “We need public acceptance for development of dense buildings and environments.”

Several people, including Caryn Payzant, advocated a role for the Center in bringing such issues to the fore, exploring alternatives, educating people and bringing all interested parties to the table. Jim O’Grady, Assistant City Manager of Temecula, called for local leadership conferences which promoted a more regional perspective among both elected officials and city managers.

The planning process for the Center for Sustainable Suburban Development will continue January 17 with a breakfast attended by a wide spectrum of private sector leaders, who will focus their own stations, water treatment plants and other government services.

Yet, because of the state’s structure for funding local entities, cities’ best approach for increasing general fund revenues is to attract retailers and the sales taxes they generate. Thus, land use decisions are made based on their revenue potential rather than what the community needs or wants.

This issue is made even more complex because the state legislature or Congress can impose regulations which restrict local agencies’ ability to raise money or to do what they want with land. Mark Pisano, general manager of the Southern California Association of Governments, noted that setting aside land for environmental concerns based on federal law brought on conflicts with local landowners – conflicts that were often solvable only with large amounts of money. Ontario City Manager Greg Devereaux responded that protecting species reflects national concerns and national policy – and therefore should be paid for with federal resources.

Similar concerns affected the transportation debate. The benefits of the Alameda Corridor are being felt by Los Angeles County residents who can enjoy increased jobs and economic activity, and residents of the Midwest and East, who can enjoy cheaper televisions. The problems of increased rail and truck traffic are about to be borne by Inland residents and businesses. A federal tax on imports or some similar device could be used to build grade crossings or fund other necessary improvements.

Even more attention focused on the questions surrounding the freeway system – and public transportation as an alternative. Dave Willmon of the California League of Cities noted that most people see their commute as a reasonable tradeoff – for now. Frances Vasquez of State Senator Nell Soto’s office focused on the need for more public transportation systems, and for more walkable communities to reduce the demand for either individual cars or public transport. Burnie Cavender, General Manager of the San Bernardino Valley Water Conservation District, pointed out that highways are already heavily subsidized and their constant extension becomes a cause of even more sprawl.
Sprawl is personified by housing, and many of the groups mentioned the need to plan for denser residential neighborhoods and more multi-family developments. John Terell, Planning Director for Moreno Valley, suggested that planners have to be more conscious of creating greater housing variety in their cities and within neighborhoods. Most plans that come to cities call for single-family homes in a relatively small price range, creating highly homogenized communities. More attention should be paid to mixing in affordable housing.

The kind of mixed-use neighborhoods envisioned by some attendees were just one part of a broader concern with quality of life issues, such as smog, parks, youth recreation and crime. Darcy Kuenzi of Riverside County Supervisor Marion Ashley’s office said such these things played a large role in attracting people to move to the region, and to commit to it. Jesse Valenzuela of Congressman Joe Baca’s office noted that many youth recreation areas and playgrounds are not sufficiently funded. This not only turns off potential residents, but leaves communities with young people with too much time on their hands.

There was also concern with maintaining the special place that the Inland region holds in the natural world. Mike Allen, director of the Center for Conservation Biology at UCR, noted that there are about 8,000 endangered species in the region. Preserving them is also an opportunity to create the open space, parks and other amenities that add to the quality of life — and provide opportunities for young people to connect with the natural world.

Such quality of life issues also play a role in the difficulty of retaining the region’s college graduates. Ed Frisch, a Beaumont planning commissioner, argued that a better job creation program could be a solution to both this problem and reducing the hordes commuting to the coastal counties every weekday morning. And Rick Sayre of the Moreno Valley Unified School District suggested a study of how to bring industry to where the labor force resides could be a good initial project for the Center. Ed Blakely noted that employers move toward skilled individuals and anything that could be done to retain recent graduates would pay for itself. In Boston, for example, there is a program that provides mortgage help for skilled graduates under 30 years of age.

Similarly, Michael Beck, deputy city manager of Riverside, suggested we need to make a commitment to keeping talented people in education, by aiding programs to improve teachers’ skills and keep experienced teachers in the area. And, to return to the direct affects of rapid population growth, Caryn Payzant and Sharon McHolland of the Alta Loma School District, noted that school district funds are often eaten up by the need for new facilities, and necessary upgrades of older facilities can receive short shrift.

There was a strong feeling across the groups that a regional approach was necessary. “Until elected officials decide to work together to approach problems as a region, not an island, coordinating development will be difficult,” said Cruz Esparza of the city of Chino. He also suggested a method be developed for staff members to get together on a regional basis. Jerry Blum, Planning Director for Ontario, said there was “the county line problem,” the tendency to think that the political boundary between Riverside and San Bernardino counties gave them different agendas on regional issues. Riverside Mayor Ronald Loveridge also noted the need for agencies to work together, to make sure that regional bodies such as the South Coast Air Quality Management District and individual cities were working towards the same goals.

There was a call for both the schools and other groups to make children and adults more conscious of the region, its problems and its choices. How do we get people plugged in and connected to our communities, asked Nancy Martin, Economic Development Director of Corona. Andres Soto suggested that...