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Peer reviewed

Review: Taking Sustainable Cities Seriously

By Kent E. Portney

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Kent E. Portney. *Taking Sustainable Cities Seriously*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003. 284 pp. ISBN 0-262-16213-X. US\$25.95

This is an extremely valuable and timely book. Although sustainability is self-evidently a catch-cry of both environmentalists and political leaders, its implementation is uneven, and often nothing but a rhetorical screen to hide the fact that nothing has been done to achieve a more sustainable society.

Portney commences with a conceptual review of the ideas underlying sustainability. The comprehensiveness and clarity of this review is such that the book is worthy of attention for this chapter alone. Portney fully recognizes that a sustainability program will face considerable difficulties in achieving genuine implementation, will contain ambiguity and even apparent contradiction, and certainly must embrace environmental, economic, and social dimensions. Then, although the focus of this study is upon cities, Portney emphasizes that real sustainability must embrace consideration of the wider geographic context of city areas. Although not quite so explicitly, Portney also recognizes that any sustainability initiative must walk hand-in-hand with its own history.

A second chapter reviews the methodological issues in measuring the strength of any city's commitment to sustainability. All too often, the accountability of any sustainability program gets lost in its own complexity. Portney's framework is based in a deceptively simple set of indicators, but all can be measured in practice and all demonstrate a high degree of referential validity. Such an approach can, if effectively implemented, provide a high degree of transparency and so force a high degree of accountability.

Successive chapters each deal with the key dimensions of environment and energy, economic development, the place of community, equity, and social justice. These each exhibit still more of the rigorous approach taken by the author in the opening chapters.

Finally, eight sites with substantial sustainability commitment are described in depth and a final chapter provides a national overview and further questions that arise from what is really happening. On one hand, I find a sense of optimism from the very promising results achieved by some cities, each in their own way. On the other, there is still a great deal that is not

being done even in the eight cities-and they are a very small part of the national picture. Hopefully they will start to set the pace for others.

My own reading suggests that the success of any city-wide initiative has to arise out of a genuine concern about the processes of governance and the quality of city government. Unless partnerships in governance are effectively negotiated on sound principles, one faces an essentially unsustainable reality. If these processes develop a sufficiently comprehensive system of networking and control, they may even override indifference, neglect, or even opposition on the part of government, which after all, is often a somewhat transitory phenomenon.

I can only commend this work very highly. It should be required reading for all those who share in the responsibility for city management. At the academic level, it would be invaluable reading for those concerned with any aspect of environmental, economic, or social development and/or studying in such fields as urban planning and policy, political science, sociology, and social geography.

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