Book Review of Communities on the Way: "Rebuilding Local Economies in the United States and Canada"

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Communities on the Way: Rebuilding Local Economies in the United States and Canada
Many planners caught up in the everyday struggle of preparing zoning bylaws, subdivision regulations, and gov-
ernment grants-in-aid often wonder what is happening with that dedicated group of what seem to be counter-
culturists across town who are attempting to bring increased prosperity to the community through community-based economic development (CED) initiatives. Rarely communicat-
ing with them, perceiving them as outside the political mainstream, infrequently helping them, and often treating them with disdain, too many planners see them as little more than the last vestiges of the grassroots movements of the 1960s. That is a mistake for, as Stewart Perry, president of the Institute for New Enterprise Development, informs us, CEDs represent a critical strategy for bringing improved economic opportunity and stronger community cohesion to distressed areas. For that reason alone this book provides an important message. Indeed, for anyone working in areas of economic distress, where plants are closing and where institutions are unwilling or unable to help, CED may be the only realistic approach through which recovery can begin.

Perry systematically analyzes community-based economic development and its role in fostering economic recovery via locally based and locally controlled efforts in Canada and the United States. Using case studies, personal experiences, and summaries of in-depth reports from both countries, he provides a comprehensive review of the role, methods, effectiveness, and hope of those strategies. Written in a warm, personal style, the book is divided into three major sections. The first focuses upon how the author became involved in the development of locally based economic development strategies. Drawing upon work throughout the United States and Canada, he first presents his findings in the context of the social movements of the 1960s and then moves to more current experiences. Within this section is a very important summary of strategies that local planners often mistakenly undertake in their attempts to help communities recover. Entitling them the “beggar-your-neighbor policy,” the “boost-your-city campaign,” the “big-bang theory,” and the “high-tech gamble,” he carefully and succinctly explains the problems with those approaches.

In the second section Perry describes how communities can develop their own locally based economic strategies. He explains the key steps, the role of outsiders, institutional formations, and financial approaches. To the planner who has little involvement with locally based economic development strategies, this section will be most helpful. In effect, it takes the reader inside the organizations to show how they function.

In the third section, Perry focuses on the effectiveness of those strategies to date. Drawing on material from several evaluative studies, he presents evidence of the relative effectiveness of the strategies in achieving their goals. He correctly concludes that the concept can and does work, but that it takes great skill at the managerial level to derive true, long-term gains. In short, he demonstrates that the local effects are no different than any other entrepreneurial activity: good planning, organizing, managing, marketing, and financing are critical for long-term success. Finally, Perry closes with a thoughtful presentation of additional steps to expand further the creation of locally based development efforts.

The book has two major shortcomings. First, it offers little systematic direction for planners who wish to support the approach. In fact, this lack of a “primer” reaction
represents the book’s major problem. Rather than showing how the planner could tie CEDs into a comprehensive economic strategy, Perry largely has chosen to treat the concept as a separate entity. Second, he gives too little information on the faults of the CED approach (and there are many). If we are to learn from our mistakes and are going to support CEDs it is imperative that we know the full story. In fact, I have been involved with ten CED efforts over the past five years and all have major problems concerning their long-term prospects. Among those problems are staffing, direction, ideology, funding, and relationships with government entities. Unfortunately, the author focuses upon few of the problems in any analytical and critical manner.

Despite those shortcomings, this book is worth purchasing. Its explanation of the CED evolution, practice, and possible future should interest anyone involved in communities that need to begin grassroots, self-directed economic development. It also is important in that it shows that this effort is not the last bastion of “1960s think,” but a critical element in any economic strategy. Finally, it provides a basis for planners to explain to local political figures that CEDs are worth their support. In sum, it is a good book.

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