

How This Future Came to Be

by John Goekler jdg@change factors.com

It all started several years ago when a few of us got together and decided we had to create a new way to live. It was kind of hard at first, mostly because a lot of people couldn't imagine it or thought it just couldn't be done. "You guys are on drugs," they said. "The City won't let you. Americans will never give up their cars. Developers will block you. Get over it."

We were kind of discouraged until someone reminded us of what Gandhi said: "First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win." We decided that meant we had already advanced to Stage 2. We were progressing.

We figured out a way to involve folks through events like potlucks, dances, concerts, picnics and softball and soccer games. People came because it was fun and stayed to envision and design the kind of lives they wanted to live and the communities they wanted to live in. We used a self-organizing model so people could choose areas that were important to them and invite others with interest and knowledge to participate. Then they figured out together what was necessary to move forward at each step.

Things really got going when a homeowners association asked us to help them re-envision and redesign their neighborhood. (One of their members attended a presentation we made to a community service group, liked what she heard, and invited us for tea with some of her neighbors.) We ended up doing a weekend workshop, after which they decided to go for it. Then we facilitated their process.

Working with local architects and green builders, we worked through a community organization and design process. Then we worked with planners to adopt necessary zoning changes. The City did push back at first, but they came on board after we enlisted realtors and builders who recognized the economic potential of redevelopment. (It didn't hurt that we allied with other groups and helped elect a majority of the City Council and ratify a new city charter!) Once the City saw the potential to reduce traffic and pollution, save water and avoid the infrastructure costs of sprawl, they moved to extend the model, and it became the centerpiece of the Mayor's economic development program.

A local television reporter and some writers got interested and told the story, and the whole thing just cascaded. Other neighborhoods liked what they saw and began their own processes. Once we hit critical mass, the City, County and State were able to justify new, clean public transit systems, so we could easily connect with other communities near and far.

When conventional lenders had trouble imagining how to finance new models like co-ownership, we created a Community Bank. We all put up \$100 shares to get started, but after a blogger pushing socially responsible investing discovered us, we were very quickly fully subscribed by investors who wanted to have their money working in a green and equitable way they could be proud of. The bank underwrites our homes, facilities and businesses, from commercial paper to mortgages to micro lending.

Now people can hardly imagine that we ever used to live the old way. As I write this, I'm sitting in the shade of a blossoming peach tree in our cluster's rooftop orchard, listening the buzz of bees pollinating and the laughter of children working in the gardens with their parents and friends. Several Blue Energy solar wind turbines are silently producing electricity. (They're so beautiful most visitors think they're art mobiles!) In peak production times, we sell the excess power to PNM.

In fact, the community owns our "commons" of water, power, communications and food production. We collect all our rainwater and recapture all our gray water, processing through "living systems" that provide not only pure water, but also habitat for birds, frogs, butterflies and small mammals. Our "digester" plant for human, food and garden waste takes 14 days to turn input into perfectly pure compost. We use it in our gardens and landscaping, and sell the balance to a local garden center. The whole thing is powered by the methane it produces. Recycling is virtually 100 percent, and some residents make good livings handling and selling it on the spot markets.

Our communications collective offers voice, cable and data services for a reasonable fee. We own the fiber optic "pipe" and charge content providers like Comcast to move their product over our network. The whole

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thing is managed by a local board and maintained and operated by a “tech crew” of kids from our local school. They get educational credit for their work and we get top quality, personal service.

Folks are healthy here. The low stress lifestyle probably has a lot to do with it, since we don't spend much time being stuck in traffic or scuffling over silly things. Now when we have to wait in line, it's a social occasion. Most of the stuff that used to make us nuts just doesn't exist in our community. With the time we once spent commuting and scuffling, we walk, jog and bike along the trails, hit the gym, do yoga and Pilates, meditate and just play. Local organic food and close relationships are healthy, too. We have primary and urgent care facilities in storefront locations when we need them, and lots of holistic wellness practitioners. We also have excellent elder care services and housing, so our elders can age in place.

A lot of people have created “neighborly livelihoods” they really love. A day working in the library; a day or two in one of the shops; some child care; a bit of gardening or landscaping; some writing or web design. Because we “co-located” so many of our facilities, it's easy to work in a variety of places if we want to. The local fire hall is on a corner of the school yard, for example. The kids get great role models, the firefighter / medics provide a 24/7 presence for safety, and the City gets a great deal on facility costs. The school also houses our Child And Maternal Wellness Clinic, our Family and Community Development Center, our Life Long Learning Center and our Community Recreation program.

Across the street (pedestrian, bike and electric cars only!) from the library is the Community Economic Center. Our neighbor, Rosalina, recently opened her own hair salon a few doors down. The folks at the CEC helped her develop a business plan, work through the licensing and regulatory process, gain essential business skills, and get a micro loan from our bank to start out. Now it seems like half the folks in the neighborhood are her clients, and she's just hired two more people at good wages.

I spend a day a week helping in the kindergarten, consult and train for local non-profits, write about this work for various media, and help in the local bookstore / bakery a day a week. Several times a year, I ride the Rail Runner to Lamy to catch the high speed train to speak, train and consult around the country. At 380 miles per hour, the “mag-lev” train gets me almost anywhere in the country faster and more comfortably than flying from Albuquerque used to. (And I don't have to pay for parking, deal with the hassle of “security” or feel guilty about spewing hydrocarbons all across the country.)

Annika and I live in 700 square feet. It sounds small to some people, but we designed the interior with a boatbuilder pal, and he utilized every square inch, so everything fits and works perfectly. It's oriented to gain solar heat and light in the winter, and be shaded and cool in the summer. It's so efficient that we use almost no energy for heat or cooling. When we need more space, we utilize the community facilities – laundry, yoga / meditation space, guest quarters, music room, wood shop, pottery studio, art loft . . . We also spend a lot of time outside in the community green spaces. We don't own a car, since we can walk, bike or take transit almost everywhere we want to go. If we need a vehicle, we rent a “Flex Car”. It saves us a ton of money and we never worry about finding parking.

We're very involved in community process, but in a loose way, because the neighborhood is largely “self-governing”. We have a very effective communications network that lets us know about issues and opportunities. When information goes out over it, the people who are most interested band together to respond. It's self-organizing and based on trust. Groups coalesce to deal with emerging issues using an “Open Space” model, then disband when the work is done. Different leaders emerge as necessary to handle specific tasks; there is no standing hierarchy or authority. In all group processes, we adhere to the principles of Non-Violent Communication to make sure everyone is respectfully heard.

Our young people are healthy, happy and just delightful to be around. Because they're known and valued members of the community, the alienation and suspicion we used to see between kids and adults just doesn't exist. Crime is unknown in the village. Because people know each other, we look out for each other. We had to laugh the other day when some global policy wonk argued that we needed to distribute our critical infrastructure to protect it from terrorist attacks. We distributed ours because it's more efficient, good for the environment, creates jobs and saves us a lot of money! *That* enhances our security.

Well, I have to go now. It's time for my guitar lesson. My teacher is a 16 year old neighbor, and he's blistering! I have to practice because there's a blues jam at the Café tonight, and I'm fixin' to tear it up!

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