

Am I an environmentalist or a community developer?

December 8th, 2010 by Joe Kriesberg

In 1993, when I was finishing law school I was considering many career options and decided that I wanted to shift from my prior work in the clean energy field and tackle issues of racism and poverty more directly by working in community development. I was making an intentional and significant shift from one field to another. Years later, when I was looking to hire a new MACDC staff person I had several candidates apply for the job who were employed by environmental organizations. I finally asked one why he wanted to make the shift. His answer was to say that he did not see community development as a new field at all – it was all the same field!

It was an “aha” moment that forced me to rethink my assumptions and definitions. It also was a moment when I realized that the leaders of the future often see connections and similarities where some in the past would have seen barriers and differences.

The reality that community development and environmental sustainability are part of the same movement was on clear display at a session hosted last week by the Mel King Institute’s Community Development Innovation Forum.

At the event, MACDC’s Don Bianchi presented the findings of our new report “[Community Development Goes Green: How MACDC Members are Embracing Environmental Sustainability](#).” The report found that 65 MACDC member organizations are engaged in at least one activity or project that explicitly advances environmental sustainability. We also heard about some examples, including including [Franklin County CDC’s](#) efforts to promote local agriculture, [Urban Edge’s](#) green community education work, [Homeowner’s Rehab’s](#) work to retrofit existing apartment buildings (including one where they reduced energy usage by 69%) and the [Neighborhood of Affordable Housing \(NOAH\)’s](#) environmental justice campaigns to clean up contaminated land and engage young people in environmental action. We also heard from Tapper Carew who is working with Mel King and the [South End Technology Center](#) to train young people on new solar and transportation technologies.

The presentations were truly inspiring.

I then moderated a panel with John Kassel from [Conservation Law Foundation](#), Mariella Tan Puerto from the [Barr Foundation](#) and Madeline Fraser Cook from LISC’s [Green Development Center](#). They shared their observations about the work that CDCs are doing and suggested opportunities for taking it to the next level. Some of their key points:

- Collect, track and report energy and environmental impacts with data;
- With climate legislation dead in Congress, position community development as a key element of the Nation’s “Plan B” for addressing climate change;

- Recognize that community development is inherently green because urban livability is essential to stopping sprawl; and
- Focus on advocacy at both the local level and the state level, including issues that CDCs might not traditionally tackle.

For me the event symbolized how things can come full circle. In 1993, I thought I had to choose between being **either** an environmental advocate **or** a community developer. As we approach 2011, I am pleased that “either/or” has become “**both/and.**”