

Conversations Conferences



on Nebraska
Environment
and Sustainability

Nebraska's Destiny is Yet to Come

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Have you ever wondered why one square foot of real estate in Manhattan, NY will cost \$1,200 while a square foot of downtown property in Lincoln, Nebraska, will cost \$125, or less? And, why and how will people continue to pay such prices?

In Manhattan there is no vacant land available for new development; there is no potable water beneath the surface; there is no inexpensive source of energy—it all is generated elsewhere and imported; all of the food consumed in the city must be imported; and, all the materials used for construction of buildings and infrastructure must be imported from other regional and/or global sources. And, in the context of the potential impact of global warming, much of the surface of Manhattan is under threat of flooding from rising sea levels surrounding the island.

In Lincoln there is an abundance of inexpensive land, relatively speaking, upon which to accommodate shelter, habitats, recreation, commerce, institutions and industry. There is more fresh, clean and potable water available to the citizens of Nebraska than any other state in the union. The public power policies of the state have produced some of the least expensive energy for consumers, and the raw resources for solar-based, alternative energy generation are near the top of the charts for future clean energy generation within the borders of the state. The potential for convenient, inexpensive, safe and wholesome food throughout the state is unlimited. And, like New York, practically all the materials used for construction of buildings and infrastructure must be imported from other regional and/or global sources.

Land, water, energy, food, and materials—what is the future, locally and around the earth for these vital resources, both from the perspective of a need for conservation as well as opportunities for careful development for future human uses? Each of these resources will have ever more value and importance to the coming generations of urban and rural inhabitants as we attempt to respond to the imbalances between supply, demand, and affordability of our natural, earth-given resources. Nebraska has a unique collection of natural resources upon which to build a unique and sustainable future.

Land

Agricultural and rural real estate is of significant importance to the citizens, businesses, and institutions of the state and Great Plains region. The value of Nebraska's land resources, particularly agricultural land, ranks among the top in the United States. It is the basis for much of the wealth produced in Nebraska and its use and development is closely interlinked with other key issues confronting the state such as water, alternative energy production, urban development, conservation, recreation and wildlife. Increasing populations and demand for land will only increase the value of this resource and it is worthy of focus for conservation related development.

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Water

This is a unique time in Nebraska history. Our long history of easy access to water is coming to an end. The biggest question today related to the future of water resources in Nebraska is how do we manage our interconnected water resources fair and equitably for all the competing interests? Do we know enough about stream-aquifer relationships to provide the creative solutions we need? Are there solutions available that won't cripple the agricultural or environmental foundation of Nebraska and provide for a sustainable future?

Energy

Over 77% of Nebraskans' energy comes from fossil fuels. Fossil fuels exist in a limited quantity on earth. At some point in time, we will use up all the available and affordable fossil fuels, in which case if we want to continue a certain standard of living, we will need an alternative energy source. As the supply of fossil fuels shrinks and with no sign that worldwide demand for energy will decrease, prices will increase. What effect will increased electricity, gasoline, and natural gas prices have on your life? What are you going to do about it? What is your community going to do about it?

Food

Can local food systems provide all the foods we need? Are all production systems "sustainable"? Who gets to define sustainability? What is sustainable for one farm, may not be seen as sustainable for another. Is there a need for both types of food systems (commodities and local) for Nebraska, for the United States, and for the world? How does food security enter into the discussion for any type of food system? How do the food systems affect the environment and the sustainability of our natural resources?

Materials

So, how can we build buildings that use less energy and water and protect our natural resources? What are green building materials or products? Purchasing sustainable green building materials should be our goal whether renovating or building new. And all materials leaving the job site should be part of a construction waste management program, where building components and durable goods are salvaged, and paper, glass, plastic, metals, cardboard, brick and concrete rubble are recycled.

On Friday, February 11, at the UNL East Campus Union the Joslyn Institute for Sustainable Communities and the UNL School of Natural Resources are co-sponsoring a day-long opportunity for the first 200 persons who register to engage in discussions of these and other key questions about these essential Nebraska resources.

See http://www.nslw.org/conversations_materials.html for registration and details. Enter the on-line discussion NOW.

Some other questions about Nebraska's destiny might also come up, such as:

How does a place like Manhattan create intrinsic value as an urban place for living/working, at almost any price beyond the value of natural commodities? When will, or would commodity value overwhelm intrinsic social/cultural value? i.e., when would Lincoln be more attractive than Manhattan?

Note to the Legislature—Don't throw money at the failure of public policy and human consumptive behavior without first investigating the opportunities for new technologies and/or regulatory public policies for equitable access among users and neighbors for the limited natural resources, i.e. what is the value of water at the State's borders, and the value of Nebraska's destiny through preservation of the Nebraska Environmental Trust Fund?