

The Boston Globe

Keeping sustainability a top priority

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By Gary Gardner and Joseph Zaleski

In 1992, world leaders met in Rio de Janeiro to talk about economic progress and international relations. It's something that nations do from time to time. But this meeting was different. That gathering in Rio marked one of the first times that environmental sustainability was the top priority on an international agenda. It's come to be known as the Earth Summit.

Twenty years later, sustainable development has gone mainstream, with political leaders planning for a more livable environment in which their constituents can thrive.

Bostonians don't need to look far to see this.

Earlier this year the Economist Intelligence Unit and Siemens ranked Boston the fifth most sustainable city in the country, right behind San Francisco, New York, Seattle, and Denver.

This shouldn't come as a surprise – the city is building a history of sustainability initiatives.

In 2007, Boston published its first Climate Action Plan and Boston Mayor Tom Menino signed an executive order that pledged long-term greenhouse gas mitigation standards, which the city has already met. On Earth Day 2010, Menino set a more ambitious citywide comprehensive climate action plan into motion. Some of his goals include reducing the city's greenhouse gas emissions 25 percent by 2020 and 80 percent by 2050, considering climate change during all city planning discussions, and making the city an attractive place for "green collar" businesses.

To hit these targets, Boston has initiated a number of strategies.

The bike stations around Government Center, the Aquarium, and the North End are part of the city's new bike share program. The program is attempting to make the city more bike-friendly and reduce traffic congestion downtown.

As for energy usage, municipal projects like Renew Boston are providing free building energy assessments and upgrades to individuals and businesses in the city. Better home

insulation and weatherization are excellent ways to cut down on heating and cooling costs, and new rebates for home solar electric systems are a step toward making individuals more energy independent. The city is setting the tone for the rest of Massachusetts, which has just been recognized by the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy as the most energy-efficient state in the country.

Boston is also the first major city in America with US Green Building Council LEED construction standards incorporated within its municipal zoning code.

At the national and international levels, though, most leaders have been slow to make their 1992 Earth Summit pledges a reality. True sustainability will not be easy; it'll take a complete reorientation of social and economic priorities. But, the longer international policymakers allow a culture of unchecked consumption to flourish, the more painful the transition will be.

Here are some other ideas that should be on the national agenda, highlighted in a new report published by the Worldwatch Institute.

Legislators can lead manufacturers to create more efficient products by making energy-usage standards mandatory; this should replace the voluntary Energy Star system. Energy standards for appliances have been made mandatory in Japan with the successful Top Runner program, which uses the most efficient appliance in that industry as the benchmark. In some cases, appliance manufacturers have made their products even more energy efficient than legally required.

To really promote renewable energy at home, Congress needs to reconsider federal cap-and-trade legislation. Programs like the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative – of which Massachusetts is a participant – have demonstrated that market-based energy efficiency strategies can be implemented and actively work to reduce carbon emissions and lower home energy bills. A federal cap-and-trade plan would reduce greenhouse gas emissions even further and promote forward-thinking innovations in the renewable energy market.

On the consumer front, the government should replace our current federal income tax with a progressive consumption tax. Cornell University economist Robert Frank has written that taxable consumption could be measured as the difference between annual income and annual savings. This type of tax would promote fiscal thrift and better reflect a household's environmental impacts than the current income tax. Another policy tool is standardized eco-labeling, which would encourage more environmentally informed buying habits.

As for waste, policymakers in many cities have already instituted ambitious “zero-waste” goals. At the federal level, legislators can create “take-back” laws that would place the

burden of waste reduction on producers. If companies were required to handle their own products after they are discarded, manufacturers would quickly cut back their packaging volume and make their goods more recyclable. Systems like these are already popular in Europe and Asia.

Next year, Rio de Janeiro will host another Earth Summit where participants will reflect on successes and shortcomings of the last 20 years and examine the coming 20.

As we've seen in Boston and other cities, policymakers do have the political capital and legislative tools necessary to make sustainability their highest goal. It's just a matter of doing rather than saying. When all the talking is done at Rio+20, let's hope that the world's most powerful leaders are finally ready to act.

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