

President's Message

Regionalism... A niche for environmental health

...John M. Barry, Ph.D.

Not long ago I was returning to Charlotte from an environmental health association meeting in the northwest, and as I looked out of the window of my plane at 35,000 feet, I found myself staring at the dendritic drainage patterns of the Rocky Mountains where they headwaters of the Rio Grande are located. I really don't know why, but it occurred to me that for the most part, environmental health and environmental protection workers do not take enough interest in regional planning. For whatever reason, they are typically immersed in their day-to-day routine of protecting the public health and the environment.

We as practitioners claim to be educators, not just enforcers. We attempt to educate the public to the need for good environmental health practices, but at the same time, I think we are limiting our potential. We are selling ourselves and our profession short if we do not concern ourselves with regional and community planning concepts as well as traditional and non-traditional environmental health activities.

A good plan for regional development must include at a minimum, improvement in the protection of the natural environment and prevention of conflicting situations that often occur between environmental protection and economic development. It also must include an intensification of the social and economic development with special regard to the improvement of a sphere of social and economic infrastructure.

The first point is relatively straightforward. Environmental health professionals must be involved in a clear and directed program of enhancing the quality of life in a region. This doesn't always mean that each of us must run for elected office on a platform of making a utopia of our community, but it does mean that we should be aware of conditions within our community and be prepared to get involved from an

educational standpoint. It is not unrealistic that we make the commitment to educate industry and developers to good environmental theories and concepts which can produce a win/win situation for both the developer and the community.

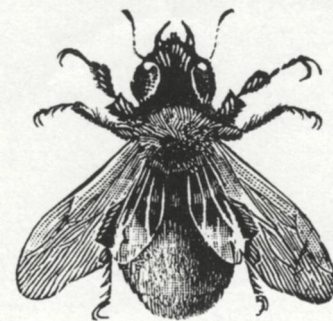
Concept number two may be just a little bit harder to define. In essence, there is a common ground between economic development and the health and well being of the public. As environmental health practitioners (and advocates!) we must be sensitive to any economic practice which can result in a lowering of health and environmental standards for any one part of our local society. A case in point is the fact that third world conditions not only exist in third world countries—they also exist in places such as our inner cities, in outlying areas such as Appalachia and in migrant labor camps. Conditions such as these are deplorable and at times may seem to be beyond that point where something can be done. Maybe so, but perception does not relieve us of the professional responsibility to make extra efforts toward educating the public to problems which, if ignored, may in the long run require greater public resources.

Now, where does that leave us? It leaves us with a regional development plan that can be divided into an outer element which

includes governmental agreements and commitments by our local and regional governing bodies, and an inner element of demographic factors such as enhanced opportunities for all segments of our society where health care and sanitation are concerned.

Regional planning is not something that can be left to those with no environmental health and environmental protection training. Professionalism dictates that we make the commitment to find our particular niche and take an active part in the process.

NEHA can be the catalyst... get involved.



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