

Read Clark-Johnson's remarks at Valley Forward Livability Summit

April 22, 2010



Morrison Institute Executive Director Sue Clark-Johnson addressed the Valley Forward seventh annual Livability Summit on April 22 (Earth Day).

The Valley Forward Association, established in 1969, has 300-plus member companies, government jurisdictions, education and non-profit communities that share the goal of promoting cooperation to improve the environment and quality of life in the region.

Here are Clark-Johnson's comments from the half-day event, held at the Wyndham Phoenix Hotel:

Good morning. This is an incredible event and it's good to see so many people here.

I thought the headline in The Arizona Republic a week ago was interesting: "Green party officially recognized in Arizona."

I thought, "wow, we have arrived."

Not so much.

We have a long way to go.

I am no expert on sustainability. But I can do research, I can ask questions, and I can sure provide editorial opinion, so I'll do a little of all three...

I didn't have to go much farther than Morrison's own archives for compelling work done over the last few years that may serve as a backdrop for our discussions today.

Morrison's Policy Choices report in 2007 is a treasure trove of information as you ponder our state's sustainability questions.

Perhaps the most compelling part was the summary, by ASU President Michael Crow.

He said: "The 20th century was about raising Arizona; the 21st century is about sustaining it. And that requires bold policy ideas to bring about rapid and systemic change."

Our report recommended nine policy changes that in their entirety could serve as Arizona's first sustainability agenda. Here are a few of them:

- Expand access to 21st century education and job skills for adults
- Require regional planning that integrates water use and mobility options in existing and new communities
- Update groundwater management policies throughout Arizona
- Provide incentives and information to businesses to support industrial recycling facilities and more technologies for sustainability
- Create a sustainability scorecard and use it for consistent monitoring, feedback and planning. (Stay tuned. Morrison and ASU's Global Institute of Sustainability are doing just that.)
- Embrace sustainable goods, services and knowledge as a focus for economic development.

That was in 2007.

So, here we are in 2010 in the midst of one of our deepest economic downturns in and of itself an example of lack of holistic progress towards a sustainable state...as Arizona once again lurches from boom to bust, from budget to budget, lacking the stability and sustainability of a solid foundation.

To be sure, we read everyday about new efforts along the road to sustainability, like solar rebate programs, new "green" buildings; the solar summit just last week; the Corporation Commission's emphasis on renewable energy; or APS' Arizona Sun Program with a \$500 million investment over 4 years to develop solar projects. And just yesterday the announcement by Vice President Biden that an ASU/Phoenix/APS project was awarded \$25 million by DOE to work with 3,500 families on energy efficiency technologies, creating several thousand jobs.

There is much going on here in things "green."

All well and good, but if you agree with the notion that sustainability means also economic growth and wealth generation, which in turn continuously enhances natural and social capital, then where are we here, now, in 2010?

- 1 in 5 children live in poverty, as well as a high percentage of +65 yr olds – and that was BEFORE the recession, allegedly in our heyday.

- Arizona incomes are far below the national average, driven by sub-par job quality and low workforce participation.

- State government's general fund revenues have been declining steadily, primarily driven by the steady stream of tax cuts since the mid-1990s. The general fund has become dependent on sales taxes. But the narrow base of sales tax translates into ever-slowng revenues at the same time as the recession hit us so hard. Historically the general fund received \$50 per \$1,000 of personal income. Now it's less than \$30.

By the way, general fund expenditures on natural resources what include the oil and gas conservation commission, solar energy commission and department of water resources is down 42.8% from '07 to 2010.

And here are some disturbing numbers culled from Morrison Institute's Arizona Indicators Web site that show our dismal national standing among other states:

- State Expenditures per Capita - 41st
- Higher Education per Capita - 41st
- The arts- 48th, a 20-point drop in 10 years
- Personal Income per Capita - 40th

- K-12 Education per Capita - 51st

Our report's summary said this should convince us that we are now at the stage where there is everything to win and everything to lose.

I would suggest we are not winning and that's worthy of discussion. We do not have a healthy economy – ergo, we do not have a healthy environment.

At the moment, from the perspective of someone who was in journalism for 41 years...and in Arizona a decade,I am discouraged by how many really bright people are asking whether our state is so broken it can't be fixed. I am discouraged by NYT headlines about our immigration busts, kicking needy kids off medical care, allowing guns just about everywhere, and just last week, screaming national headlines and debates about Arizona's attempt at legalizing racial profiling. Oh, and then there's the "birther bill."

I am also discouraged by the ideological divides and the communication chasm between elected officials and those who elected them.

We continue to make decisions about the future of state amidst the crisis and chaos of budget-making, making them in a vacuum with no coherent plan. No business is sustainable without a sound business plan that serves as the framework for decision-making. No state is sustainable without a vision for its future either.

None of this is a good backdrop for a sustainable state.

There is hope, however, if we look at some nascent efforts.

The first good idea would be to glom on to The Arizona We Want report from the Center for The Future of Arizona. Former ASU president Lattie Coor has been stumping the state with that report, which is based on a Gallup poll of Arizonans who clearly said what they want...

- Good jobs. Only 6 percent of our residents rate Arizona "very good" for job opportunities – and that was before we lost 200,000 jobs.
- Strong leadership. Only 10 percent believe that elected officials represent their interests, and only 10 percent rate the performance of elected officials as "very good." Of the 6 leadership qualities presented in the Gallup Arizona Poll, citizens strongly agree that leaders need to understand complex issues – like sustainability – but they also want elected officials who will work across party lines.
- The state's natural beauty and open spaces are seen by citizens as our greatest asset. Arizona landscapes matter — on both economic and emotional levels. It's important that growth and development in the future respect the passion that citizens feel for their environment. There is only one Arizona, and must preserve it. Instead, we close state parks due to lack of sustainable funding.
- Energy, synergy and opportunity – that's what young college graduates are looking for in order to stay in the state that provided and paid for much of their education. But Arizona is not a great place for young college graduates. In fact, only 11 percent of our residents believe their city or area is a "very good" place for young college graduates looking to enter the job market. We're losing our best human assets to other states. Why? Young professionals like places that share their commitment to the environment and "green" thinking. ... There's that word again – green – and as Kermit the Frog said so many years ago, "It's not easy being green."

No, it's not easy being green. But Arizona must move beyond its aversion to the many shades of green, starting with the focus on forever removing the brown cloud that hangs above our heads where blue skies should preside.

It's not only unsightly, it's unhealthy, with upwards of 15,000 hospital emergency room visits from asthma sufferers in Maricopa County alone in 2007, according to Arizona Indicators.

I am heartened by several clarion calls for leadership development, more civil discourse and improved civic literacy. Out of the ashes perhaps some very good things will emerge that will make us stronger and indeed sustainable. We all share in Arizona's future.

Because I am at heart a journalist, let me pose some questions for all of you that we have asked before and, for the most part, are still unanswered...

- How can we make the investments that are needed now and over time to support sustainability?
- Can our business community embrace sustainability as a competitive advantage instead of simply viewing it as a cost?
- How can we create an environment that overcomes political culture and ideology ... wherein our leaders, public and private, join together in an effort to create a statewide vision for sustainability?

The answers are in this room. They're everywhere we go, if we listen. Arizonans are talking about Arizona's future much more these days. And that's a good thing. After all, when the polarization of partisan politics leads to gridlock and stalemate, like-minded Arizonans can still find common ground in solid public policy that stands tall as rhetoric collapses under its own mythical weight.

And that's what it's about: public policy, not politics.

We need to elect better leaders, just as we need to assume leadership roles. We cannot be mere passengers on this road trip or worse, back-seat drivers. We must grab the steering wheel to prevent the state from veering off the cliff, now that we know what it feels like to hit the ditch.

Having an "R" or "D" attached to your efforts matters little, unless of course that stands for Research and Development in a new commitment to the future of Arizona, which must strive to be as acclaimed for its technology and bioscience as it is for its world-famous pristine desert and mountain backdrops.

Red state, blue state? No. How about green state?

The future is sustainable only if we plan for tomorrow – and the tomorrow after that. We must invest in ourselves, Arizona. You can't get past the future otherwise – not without paying an even higher cost: the sad liquidation sale of the very heart and soul of a state.

Stay gold, Arizona, by going green.

Thank you.