

# Parkland Conference: From Crisis to Hope

## Healthy Lives and Communities

By Radical Randy

You must have noticed how Edmonton has become a more livable city, much more in tune to the natural rhythms of life, since the oil boom. No? Well then you may be interested in the results of this year's Parkland Institute Conference. Held at the University of Alberta on the weekend of November 16 to 18, the Parkland's eleventh annual presentation was entitled "From Crisis To Hope: Building Just and Sustainable Communities". Last year's symposium dealt with Alberta's giveaway of potential royalties to the oil companies. This year looked to the coming post-carbon age after the oil and gas have run out or been phased out due to global warming considerations. The conference delved into the intimate ties between this and the question of how to build more sustainable communities in the future, including issues of housing density, transportation, and food production.

Global warming has now been thoroughly established as a man-made danger caused by our carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions. The deceptive market based solution of carbon trading to solve global warming was thoroughly debunked during Friday's keynote address. Additionally, peak oil will occur, if it hasn't already, as declining production sinks below rising demand, especially if India and China continue expanding their economies at their current pace. Global oil exports may begin to dry up in ten years. Even the proposed huge expansion of the Alberta tar sands from one to five million barrels a day, with its attendant environmental nightmares, won't close the gap. The dirtiest of all fossil fuels, coal, will likely reach peak production in ten to fifteen years despite industry assurances to the contrary. Fossil fuels currently supply 85 percent of world energy and all energy from these fuels will probably peak around the year 2010. Biofuel production such as corn ethanol requires almost as much energy as it provides and removes valuable farmland from crop production, driving up food prices. The non-renewable alternatives don't look promising either. The sputtering attempt of the nuclear power industry to claw its way out of its well-deserved grave is driven by the need of the industry for its government subsidized profits, not by any realistic promise of safe, abundant energy. The only viable long-term solution involves a combination of energy efficiency, conservation, and switching to renewables such as solar, wind, and micro-hydro.

The end of the fossil fuel era will probably be felt first in the transportation sector since of it 95 percent is oil fuelled. This will mean an end to urban sprawl and the flight to the suburbs, profoundly altering the shape of our cities. Another major area to be impacted is agriculture. Everything from pesticides to chemical fertilizers to farm machinery to transporting the produce itself uses fossil fuels. This is a direct result of the transformation of farming from a family-centered small-scale enterprise to a corporate agribusiness with the resulting loss of diversity and food quality. The current globe trotting dinner will be largely replaced by more organic locally grown fare.

A major aspect of sustainability both in our communities and the planet involves using the natural world in a manner that allows us to continue a given lifestyle indefinitely. In practice this means only extracting what we need at the same rate that it can be replenished and returning our wastes at a rate that allows them to be reincorporated into the ecosystem. We must live off the interest of nature rather than squandering the principal. To do otherwise leads us to environmental bankruptcy. Capitalism, like cancer, must constantly grow and expand into new areas to survive: limitless, infinite growth on a limited, finite planet. It is therefore hardly surprising we are edging ever closer to an environmental systems crash. The patterns of consumption in our communities and elsewhere must always reflect nature's reality, not politicians' rhetoric, illusory techno fixes, or the greedy fantasies of global investors.

One possible solution has been developed in the form of a twelve point Citizens Agenda created by over one thousand Calgarians. It considers factors such as our ecological footprint, access to transit, and indicators such as the number of people depending on food banks to evaluate the sustainability and livability of our communities. Their plan includes mandating that at least 15 % of community development should be for low-income housing and that city design be community-oriented and transit accessible. However, the necessary changes will only be made if we have greater transparency in municipal government and an end to city councilors' reelection funding by real estate developers.

Also required will be an end to the culture of entitlement whereby anyone who can afford a new toy feels a right, even a social duty, to own it. This leads to a deeper question: how we measure what really matters. Traditionally economics focuses on the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as the prime indicator of social well being, regardless of how unfairly the wealth is distributed. The Genuine Progress Indicator has been proposed as a more useful measure of the Genuine Wealth of Communities. This factor, which includes social and environmental impacts, is more suitable for measuring the sustainable well being of communities especially since GDP has little correlation to citizen's reported satisfaction with life.

By its nature, this somewhat speculative look into our alternative post-carbon future was not as tightly structured as last year's conference, but the wide-ranging series of topics made up in variety what it lacked in cohesiveness. Ultimately the path to truly sustainable communities involves challenging entrenched economic interests and changing our society's maldistribution of wealth. A living wage and decent accommodation for all are a prerequisite for a just and sustainable future. We also won't have an economically viable system without an ecologically wiser use of resources. Let's just hope that the debate the Parkland Institute has helped to open up around oil and gas royalties will be repeated for this central aspect of our future.

More information about the Parkland Institute and its conferences may be found at [www.ualberta.ca/parkland](http://www.ualberta.ca/parkland)  
Information on this and other economic and social issues may be found at <http://activistresources.raisemyvoice.com>