



Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Community Development and a Sense of Place

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Wendell Berry

The work of community development is very much tied to place. Even though today we speak of virtual communities or communities of practice that are disconnected from place, when we speak of community development we are talking about developing the capacity of local communities—neighborhoods, towns, regions. Wendell Berry is one of America's preeminent thinkers and writers on sustainable communities and the importance of having a sense of place in particular. Berry has said "if you don't know where you are, you don't know who you are."

Wendell Berry is a writer of poetry and fiction, as well as many influential essays on community, place, and environmental sustainability. He is also a farmer and vigorous advocate for community sustainability and is seen as somewhat of a founding father of the local foods movement. Among his many books of essays are classics such as *The Unsettling of America*, *What Are People For?*, and *The Way of Ignorance*. Although Berry's point-of-view is very much from an agrarian (Jeffersonian) perspective, his ideas about communities and a sense of place are more universal.

Berry was recently honored to give the Jefferson Lecture established by the National Endowment for the Humanities. It is "the highest honor the federal government confers for distinguished intellectual achievement in the humanities." In that (2012) lecture, Berry noted that "I have never separated myself from my home neighborhood, I cannot identify myself to myself apart from it. I am fairly literally flesh of its flesh. It is present in me, and to me, wherever I go." That sentiment really epitomizes what a sense of place is about. And that kind of sense of place is a huge community asset. Communities made up of individuals with that sense of belonging have a greater capacity to work together to both leverage and sustain community assets.

In the Jefferson lecture Berry cited the work of Wallace Stegner, one of his teachers, who also famously wrote about the importance of a sense of place, or placed-ness, if you will. Stegner wrote that Americans seem to be divided by two different dispositions that he called "boomers" and "stickers." Boomers are noted by the propensity to "pillage and run" in a quest to make it on "easy street" whilst stickers "settle, and love the life they have made and the place they have made it in." (From Stegner's *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*, Random House, New York, 1992, pages xxii & 4.) Berry added that "the boomer is motivated by greed, the desire for money, property, and therefore power... Stickers on the contrary are motivated by affection, by such love for a place and its life that they want to preserve it and remain in it."

This dichotomy of boomers and stickers is an interesting one that zeroes in on the importance of sense of place for community development. When community economic development is thought of in very narrow, instrumental terms (in terms of economic gain only), the sense of place can be lost and in the process what makes the community worth preserving, not to mention developing, can be lost. Thus according to Berry (and Stegner), boomers see a community and



see dollar signs only, and in their quest for “development” may actually do more harm than good. Stickers, on the other hand, see the community as home, and think in terms of how they can preserve what is unique about it. The “sticker” approach to community development seems very consistent with the assets-based approach to community economic development highlighted often on this site. This kind of inside-out approach to development is built on the placed approach of “stickers,” if you will, as opposed to the outside-in, dis-placed approach of “boomers.”

I should note that Berry’s writings are more-often-than-not polemical. He is a social critic. So most people would be hard-pressed to read his writings and not find something to disagree with. For example, in his Jefferson Lecture Berry is very critical of James B. Duke, who is a towering historical figure here in North Carolina. Berry aims to provoke discussion and a (re)thinking of conventional wisdom. He is in a lot of ways like his intellectual forebearer, Thomas Jefferson. His localism tweeks liberals and conservatives in equal measure, and he has ardent fans from both the right and left. I find that kind of writing useful in helping me challenge my own assumptions and question the status-quo. I also find Berry’s love of community and place inspiring, and for those engaged in the work of community development in particular, I think there is a lot of insight to be gained in listening to what Wendell Berry has to say. A good place to start might be his 2012 Jefferson lecture which can be viewed or read online.