

**THE U.S. PRESIDENT'S COUNCIL ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT:
A CASE STUDY**

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I. Origins

In June of 1993 President Clinton issued Executive Order 12852 and officially created the President's Council on Sustainable Development (PCSD). This executive order set out three specific tasks for the council: advising the President on sustainable development issues, production of a national action strategy on sustainable development, and outreach to educate the American public on the issue. It was generally designed as a multi-stakeholder body, with members from various social and economic sectors appointed by the President to serve two-year terms. Originally, the President granted the PCSD a limited term (two years), but a number of amendments to the original executive order extended the life of the council by more than five years. The PCSD's current term expires in May 1999.

II. Council Membership and Structure

When created the council, which reports to the President, had a total of 25 members, but over the years membership has expanded and now stands at 35. Membership was expanded to permit under-represented social sectors such to join the council. Each member is supported by a liaison, who can attend, but cannot supplant or participate in decisions or discussions at PCSD meetings. This rule was established to engage members fully in the council.

Members are drawn from the highest levels of government, business and the non-profit sector. Cabinet officials from Agriculture, Commerce, Education, Energy, the Environmental Protection Agency, Housing and Urban Development, Interior, the Small Business Administration, State, and Transportation have all served as members of the PCSD. Non profit groups that have participated on the PCSD include the AFL-CIO, the Center for Neighborhood Technology and the Citizens Network for Sustainable Development, among many others. Representatives from business have included executives from such corporations as Browning-Ferris Industries, Inc., Chevron, Ciba-Geigy, Dow Chemical, Enron, and General Motors.

The PCSD has generally organized its members and the work at hand around task forces and working groups. Task forces take on specific issues, pursue activities to address these, organize smaller working groups to study specific subsets of issues and invite outside experts and opinion leaders to make contributions.

The PCSD normally meets quarterly, with additional meetings called when deemed necessary. The Council alternates meetings in Washington with meetings in regions or cities throughout the country that showcase aspects of sustainable development (e.g., Atlanta, Chattanooga, Chicago, Detroit, San Francisco, Pittsburgh, Seattle, Tulsa).

III. Evolution of the PCSD

A. Phase One: Great Expectations

The PCSD has gone through three distinct phases. The first phase (June 1993 to March 1996) enjoyed the highest support and involvement of members. The PCSD was part of a new administration whose youthful President and Vice-President signaled ample support for efforts to advance sustainable development. The PCSD also represented a grand experiment. Policy and decision making in the United States has a highly adversarial history. The development of environmental legislation, the environmental and civil rights movements, and the reform of the social welfare state have all involved frequent and often protracted conflicts among different social groups, economic interests, and government at different levels. Although only an advisory body, the PCSD brought together representatives of widely disparate social and economic interest groups and asked them to arrive at a common understanding of sustainable development, and to define a road map to move the nation in that direction. Considerable time and energy was spent by members to build sufficient trust to speak candidly and constructively to one another, to hammer out a common vision, and to translate that vision into a broad range of recommended policy changes and actions.

Organized into task forces, members began discussing how to attain “sustainable development” in the United States. Traditional divisions and concerns emerged in these debates. Industry representatives called for the need to rethink and revisit the country’s existing environmental regulatory framework. Environmental groups feared such a proposal was a thinly veiled effort to dismantle hard-won legal protection for the environment. The discussion of population and consumption issues is another example of the divisions that emerged. The importance of reducing population growth and the means to achieve it generated much contention. Environmentalists saw it as imperative to achieve sustainable resource consumption, while others feared it would unfairly target immigrants, minorities and the poor.

Several key developments permitted the council to move rise above the polarizations that initially emerged. The first was a visioning exercise early in 1994, moderated by a professional facilitator from the Keystone Center. During this retreat members had an opportunity to interact in a less formal social setting, and each contributed their own vision of a sustainable U.S. in 2050. As a result of the visioning exercise, many members realized that they shared similar ideas about what a sustainable America would look, and some basic ideas about how to get there. A second seminal development was the late 1995 election of a Republican majority in Congress. Highly charged and partisan debates between the administrative and legislative branches commenced on everything from environmental legislation to welfare reform. These developments spurred members to focus on areas where there was opportunity for a constructive dialogue, and gave the PCSD an even greater impetus to focus on the long-term. The council’s members realized that arguing about current problems and fixes would only undermine the council.

There is general consensus that the most dynamic debates and work of the council during phase one occurred in two task forces: eco-efficiency and sustainable communities. These task forces were at the center of the most difficult as well as inspiring discussions: balancing economic growth with conservation and equity concerns, and how to translate sustainable development into real change on the ground. The eco-efficiency task force came to a consensus on the importance of rethinking aspects of the current regulatory framework, creating incentives that would change consumer and industry behavior, and measuring economic progress and productivity in new ways. Much of the thinking generated by this task force formed the backbone of the final PCSD action strategy submitted to the President. The sustainable communities task force spearheaded an effort to study and engage local and regional leaders already applying sustainable development principles in their own contexts. These local and regional examples influenced the council. Members realized that the PCSD could learn from local efforts and they provided interesting models of sustainable development in action. In particular, PCSD meetings in Seattle, Chattanooga and San Francisco opened many members' eyes to the fact that sustainable development might really have the power to transform communities and economies such as with the eco-industrial parks in Baltimore, Brownsville, Cape Charles and Chattanooga.

B. Phase Two: A Rocky Road

In March 1996, the council presented its national action strategy, *Sustainable America: A New Consensus for Prosperity, Opportunity and a Healthy Environment for the Future*. At this time, the term of the PCSD was extended for an additional 9 months effectively marking the beginning of the second phase. PCSD members and co-chairs believed the council should use public interest and momentum generated by the council's report as a spring board to advance implementation of the council's recommendations. The council also wanted to increase interest in the PCSD's work at the international, national and local levels. These objectives were reflected in the task forces that were formed: international leadership, innovative local, state and regional approaches, and new national opportunities. At this time the PCSD also formed working groups, as mentioned earlier, to support participation in federal inter-agency task forces working on sustainable development issues. Finally, Vice-President Gore created a new inter-agency working group on sustainable development, dubbed the McGinty-Tyson working group, which was asked to review existing federal policy to assess opportunities for implementation of PCSD recommendations and to identify any existing contradictions.

The fruits of these efforts were mixed. The local, state and regional approach task force appeared to be the most dynamic. This task force undertook studies and recommended new approaches to encourage competing or neighboring jurisdictions to work jointly. Also, it supported several efforts to catalyze local and regional implementation of sustainable development. With the support of the PCSD, four federal agencies (DOC, DOE, EPA, and USDA) provided funding to create the Joint Center for Sustainable

Communities (JCSC). The JCSC is designed as an information clearinghouse and technical assistance center that supports innovative multi-jurisdictional approaches to community and urban development and also showcases communities that implement or demonstrate PCSD recommendations. A subset of members initiated a regional council in the Pacific Northwest. Members of this regional council (the Pacific Northwest Council for Sustainable Development) include business, tribal, state and non-governmental organizations from the states of Alaska, Idaho, Oregon and Washington. This council, much like the national council, developed a vision for the region and began building a coalition to support its implementation. Unfortunately, the PNCSD has been less successful than the JCSC in generating on-going support from federal agencies or the President's Council. As a result, the PNCSD has fundraised independently and its continued existence is uncertain.

Likewise, the efforts initiated to assess federal policy in light of the PCSD report and its recommendations appears to have fallen short. The McGinty-Tyson group completed its assessment, but to date is unclear whether or how that assessment served to guide the administration's policy priorities. Little or no mention of it is made by CEQ or existing working groups. Although the participation of PCSD members in inter-agency working groups continues today, the degree to which that participation will redirect policy or result in the kind of new regulatory approaches called for in the PCSD's *Sustainable America* report is ambiguous. These groups, however, are building on and utilizing the findings and the analysis of PCSD task forces.

This second phase of the PCSD came to a close in January 1997 with delivery of a second Presidential report, *Building on Consensus: A Progress Report on Sustainable America*, that evaluated progress made on implementation, and alternatives for measuring that progress. Because of the need to continue work on sustainable development, as highlighted in this report, the President extended the life of the PCSD to early 1999.

C. Phase Three: A Balancing Act

At the beginning of its current term (January 1997) the PCSD re-examined its focus, recognizing the challenges encountered in the preceding period. One of the PCSD's priorities was to resume its work of consensus building on key policy issues, an area where it had excelled in the first phase. Thus, the co-chairs and members proposed that the council provide advise on how the United States (government, business and organized civil society) might begin to address the problem of climate change. This was a tough and very contentious issue, but the composition of the council permitted representatives of different segments of society to discuss this issue in a less partisan forum. The task force on climate change managed to produce consensus between industrial giants and environmental organizations on a common set of climate principles.

In its current phase the PCSD has invested considerable effort in public outreach and education. The PCSD plans to host a national town meeting on sustainable development

at the end of its current term (May 1999). PCSD's new industry co-chair, Ray Anderson, and EPA's Carol Browner, are spearheading and coordinating the effort with significant participation from local and regional authorities. The meeting which will be held in Detroit and will feature many local community revitalization and redevelopment efforts in Southeastern Michigan and many other parts of the country. Plans are underway to utilize real-time conferencing and satellite down links to permit participation by interested groups and parties from throughout the United States. Through this high profile meeting the PCSD hopes to raise the visibility of sustainable development, showcase local efforts, and spur additional local, regional and ultimately national efforts.

In the area of international leadership the PCSD has taken a more active role in the current term. In March 1997, Jonathan Lash, along with the chair of the Philippine CSD, co-chaired a working group to assess national councils in the five years after the 1992 UNCED conference in Rio de Janeiro. This assessment, carried out with the participation of representatives from more than 60 national councils, was part of the Rio+5 conference that supported an even broader UN evaluation of progress since 1992 in fulfilling Agenda 21.

Since early to mid 1997 PCSD participation in international fora has been limited. But the PCSD, through the current international task force, has identified a substantive issue they would like to use as a hook to engage other national councils. The task force is currently examining the impact of international public and private capital flows and identifying opportunities that support sustainable development. The PCSD hopes to engage other national councils (e.g., a conference of the parties to an international convention, WTO meeting, OECD forum, etc) to advance thinking on this issue. The objective is to demonstrate the contribution national councils can make to mainstream sustainable development.

IV. Strengths and Achievements

The PCSD has made important contributions to the country. Over the course of five years the council: (a) articulated intelligent and comprehensive policy advice to the President, (b) built constructive and long-lasting relationships among important economic and social actors, and (c) marshalled impressive intellectual, managerial and financial contributions by hundreds of institutions, and both public and private individuals. The council's principal achievements, however, rest in three main areas.

** Proving the Utility and Value of a Multi-Stakeholder Approach*

When created the PCSD represented a complete experiment. The ability of a heterogeneous set of interests, institutions and individuals to come together and produce policy advice of any value was questioned by many, including some invited to serve as members of the PCSD. The challenge was even greater given the fact that the aside from

the directive, “to be bold and innovative,” the council was left to forge its own way. In all three phases, members have risen above vested interests, negotiated in good faith and made huge contributions of time and energy to the council’s work. The consistent quality of the policy analysis produced by the council is one vindication of the multi-stakeholder approach. For the most part, the PCSD’s advise to the administration has not followed the path of least resistance or produced watered-down recommendations. On the contrary, the PCSD has taken on very tough issues, such as climate change and regulatory reform, and contributed substantive thinking on how to tackle those problems.

The resonance of the PCSD’s work with local or regional initiatives, authorities, and organizations also validates such a multi-stakeholder approach. Local and regional authorities must deal with the cumulative effects of sectoral policies and competing jurisdictions on a daily basis. Not surprisingly, these groups are extremely receptive to the PCSD’s articulation of the responsibilities that sustainable development implies for different actors, and different levels of government.

** Crafting a Framework to Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development*

Sustainable development is a term with a great degree of “fuzziness.” The term and the concept mean many things to many people. What does sustainable development require or imply in concrete terms? What new roles and responsibilities as well as policies will be required to approach a sustainable state? The council did a masterful job of answering these questions via a consensus process. Several factors contributed to this success. The first was the commitment demonstrated by all members, especially during the first phase. This commitment was generated in large part by the clear signals from the very top of the importance of the PCSD’s work. The second factor was a decision to agree on a vision of sustainability (a common understanding of the journey’s destination) and to work backward to achieve this vision.

The crown jewel of the PCSD’s work is the national action strategy articulated in the report, *Sustainable America*. The report spells out a specific set of national goals, backs these with a broad set of policy recommendations, and details specific actions necessary to support their implementation. Finally, the report also includes a tentative set of indicators to measure the country’s progress toward achieving the goals proposed. The PCSD’s co-chairs and the task forces kept their eyes on the prize: articulating a road map for the U.S.

** Tapping Local and Regional Sustainable Development Efforts*

Time and again, PCSD members note the energy and excitement they gain from observing on the ground efforts to put sustainable development into practice or from engaging individuals in the PCSD’s work. This excitement generated a desire by many members to ensure that the council’s work support and catalyze additional community-based actions. This has been a theme that has touched all three phases of the PCSD, and that resulted in significant “ripple effects,” such as the support provided by federal agencies to the National Association of Counties and the U.S. Conference of Mayors for the creation of

the JCSC. A second example is the American Heritage Rivers Program, led by HUD in cooperation with local communities and authorities. This program is designed to reclaim the cultural, economic and environmental values of urban riverfronts and degraded waterways.

In the current phase, this effort to both tap and amplify local and regional efforts is embodied in the National Town Meeting in Detroit, Michigan now being planned for May 1999. The hope is that connecting with grassroots efforts and raising awareness will inspire more communities to embrace the principle of sustainable development and to begin putting them into practice. In addition, PCSD members involved hope it will create greater awareness and understanding of what sustainability really means.

V. Continuing Challenges

Just as the PCSD accomplished many things, it has struggled in a number of areas. Marshaling funding and resources for the PCSD has been a constant challenge, as its budget is cobbled together from contributions by participating federal agencies and private organizations. This has sometimes limited the effectiveness or continuity of the PCSD's work. The logistical challenge of writing and producing *Sustainable America* and other task force reports also strains the resources of members (who volunteer their time and fulfill already demanding duties) and that of the PCSD secretariat. The former is largely organizational or managerial problems. A number of more substantive challenges, or areas for improvement, should also be noted.

** Strengthen the Connection between PCSD and the Policy-Making Processes*

There is a need to better connect and introduce the work of the PCSD into the policy making process. The PCSD is only an advisory body, but it is not clear to what degree its advice has been actively taken up by the Clinton Administration. As noted before, there has been a clear ripple effect in several federal agencies, particularly those that are active members in the PCSD. But there was only a short-lived effort to more systematically redefine or reconsider existing policy frameworks in light of the PCSD's recommendations (McGinty-Tyson working group).

Much of the energy and the engagement by members that characterized the first phase has faded in the second and third because the expectation that the Administration would take up the council's ideas more actively was not fulfilled. The sense among observers and some members is that the PCSD's work is somewhat of an academic exercise--interesting but ultimately irrelevant to real decisions. The PCSD's impact was further limited because it did not engage Congressional leaders in its more recent work. Understandably, the degree of antagonism that has characterized relations between the executive and the legislative branch create powerful incentives against such an effort. As noted earlier, the PCSD previously avoided entangling itself in any partisan frays between these two

branches and its work benefited as a result. Ultimately, however, implementation of many of the PCSD's recommendations and ideas cannot move forward without the interest or support of Congress.

** Clarify the PCSD's Primary Role and Contribution*

Since the end of the first phase the PCSD has struggled to define its role. It has tried to balance being an advisor, outreach vehicle and implementor. This has muddied the waters. Members participate in task forces that most interest them, but the relationship between the tasks forces, or how all the PCSD's work adds up remains unclear. The PCSD has shined as a forum for the negotiation and discussion of policy choices. It has also had some success in tapping and encouraging state and local initiatives. At this time, it is also making a renewed investment in outreach and constituency building. Unfortunately the PCSD hasn't excelled at juggling all of these tasks. The PCSD would benefit from defining a primary goal and focusing all members, secretariat staff, and participants in task forces toward that end. This would increase the council's sense of purpose and make more effective use of available resources.

** Build Bridges Between Domestic and International Agendas*

Another challenge facing the PCSD is finding a way to connect the PCSD's domestically driven agenda with official U.S. commitments to fulfill Agenda 21. Outside observers have sharply criticized the PCSD for failing to fulfill or to monitor progress in meeting these commitments. These critiques are valid; the PCSD has only obliquely addressed Agenda 21. But there is a danger in the PCSD assuming full responsibility for Agenda 21. The PCSD might turn into a monitoring and reporting body, and many of its strengths (providing policy advise, engaging a variety of actors in problem solving, supporting ideas and efforts generated by local and regionally-based groups) could be diluted or completely lost.

The PCSD might be best suited to act as a bridge builder, for example, to deliberate and propose a strategy for meeting and monitoring progress on Agenda 21. Execution of this strategy would ultimately not rest on the shoulders of the PCSD. This process might begin with a comparison of recommendations contained in *Sustainable America* and Agenda 21 commitments to assess the degree of complementarity between the two. The objective is to gain commitments as well as harmonize and give due representation to both domestic and international priorities or interests.

Finally, the PCSD's somewhat sporadic efforts to engage internationally with other councils needs to be more systematic and consistent. To date co-chair Jonathan Lash has carried the banner of the PCSD in forums outside the United States. The international task force needs to institutionalize such interactions in its work. This task force's current work plan appears to be heading in that direction, but whether it bears fruit remains to be seen.

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