

Mark Hertsgaard

Next Fifty Years on Earth

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4 Ask the Climate Question

Soon all sorts of strange things will come. No longer will things be as before.

—Folktale of the Wasco tribe of the Pacific Northwest

AS A FATHER in the second era of global warming, I have my good days and my bad days. The bad days you can probably imagine. Writing this book has taught me more than I'd like to know about our climate dilemma: about how drastically our civilization must change course to avoid catastrophe, how stubbornly some people and institutions resist even minor shifts in direction, and how destabilizing the impacts that are already locked in are likely to be. In the face of this, I make a conscious effort to avoid despair, for despair only warps thought and paralyzes action. Still, the analyses that come across my desk make it all too easy to envision some very dark outcomes.

But I have good days as well, and these are usually inspired by stories that show that the climate fight is not hopeless after all. One of my best days came in June of 2008, when I went to Seattle to interview Ron Sims. As the chief executive of King County, Sims was the top elected official of a municipality that encompasses the city of Seattle, some

of its suburbs, and the corporate headquarters of Microsoft, Amazon, Starbucks, and Boeing. Over the past fifteen years, Sims had pioneered a fresh, farsighted, effective response to climate change that local governments across the United States and around the world were beginning to copy. He had linked his climate policy to a larger agenda of advancing social justice and pro-business economic development. And he had done this while remaining strikingly popular with voters, winning three straight elections by comfortable margins.

What most set Sims apart was the two-track climate strategy he employed. “We absolutely need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, but we also have to adapt to the impacts we can no longer prevent,” he told me outside his office in downtown Seattle. “The scientists say our region will see warmer, wetter winters in the future. The snowpack [atop the Cascades east of King County] will shrink. That means there won’t be enough water for everyone if we don’t get going on adaptation.”

Although Sims’s ecological commitment was ardent enough to earn him the nickname “Mr. Salmon,” his argument for taking early action to prepare for climate change was based on tough-minded economics. “We think people and businesses will want to move to King County in the future because we took action to prepare for the world of 2050,” he said. “We’re taking steps to make sure we’ll have enough water, we’ll have levees that don’t break, we’ll have alternative energy sources, economic growth in the right places, a green work force. There are going to be winners and losers under climate change. I don’t want King County to be a loser.”

Many U.S. municipalities were setting themselves up for failure, Sims added, by continuing to support sprawling growth patterns. “The more sprawl there is, the more people drive and the more greenhouse gas emissions there are,” he explained. “Sprawl is bad for adaptation, too. More sprawl requires a municipality to provide water and electricity across greater distances, which will be harder to do as water and energy become more scarce in the future.” Recently, Sims had met the mayor of Atlanta, which, like much of the southeastern United States, had suffered record drought in 2007 and 2008. Mayor Mary Frances had said her city had “no zoning, no reclaimed water, and 900,000 housing units on septic,” he recalled, his eyes widening in amazement. “That’s a catas-

trophe in the making.” Atlanta was hardly unique. “The counties around Dallas, Houston, and Phoenix that are allowing endless sprawl—those places are going to be in trouble in the future!” Sims exclaimed.

If sprawl is unsustainable, I replied, what should take its place?

“Our mantra is smart growth, green buildings, dense development, land preservation, and social justice,” Sims said. “To cope with climate change, people must live more densely. But living more densely can create friction. So how do we do it safely? By attacking poverty and creating green, livable communities with less racial and class disparity. Greenbridge is a beautiful example of that.”

Located a few minutes’ drive from the Seattle airport, Greenbridge was one of King County’s first green building projects. When Sims gave it the go-ahead in 2001, he told his advisers to “design the community we’ll live in in the future.” The job fell largely to Stephen Norman, a burly, wisecracking New Yorker whom Sims had recruited to run the county’s Housing Authority. “When I got here from Manhattan, the first thing I had to do was learn how to drive,” Norman told me. “It was a good lesson in how my built environment shaped my cultural expectations.” Due to be completed in 2012, the \$250 million Greenbridge project would consist of one thousand homes housing approximately 3,500 people, many of them recent immigrants.

Visually, Greenbridge was like no public housing development I had ever seen. Buildings were painted bright colors, came in different designs, and were bordered by attractive landscaping. Norman met me in front of the community center, where a roof of solar panels glistened in the sun. None of Greenbridge’s residential structures—townhouses, cottages, and small-scale apartments—had solar panels yet, but Norman hoped they would before long. “We’re building them ‘solar ready,’ so when solar panels get down to the right price, which shouldn’t take too many more years, we’ll be able to install them without tearing out walls,” he said. Meanwhile, extra-efficient insulation would keep the buildings cooler in summer and warmer in winter, thus delivering both mitigation and adaptation at the same time, while also lowering energy bills.

In keeping with Sims’s directive to “make it walkable,” Greenbridge boasted parks, community gardens, and access to hiking and biking trails. But there was little grass. “No, you won’t see much grass here,”

Norman said as we climbed concrete stairs to a block of rental housing where two little girls, one white and one black, merrily squirted one another with water pistols. “Grass is a terrible consumer of water, which gets expensive,” he continued. “So we planted mainly drought-resistant trees and plants.”

To protect against the opposite extreme of too *much* water, Greenbridge relies on *bioswales*—natural gutters made by digging an indentation into a flat strip of land. A bioswale runs a few feet to the side of a street; because it is about a foot lower, it collects storm water that might otherwise flood the street. Excess water flows down the bioswale to a collection area and is reused for irrigating parks and community gardens.

Soon, Norman and I had circled back to the community center, which contained a sparkling indoor basketball court and boys’ and girls’ club where kids could play or do homework after school. Next door was a library, an employment center, and an extension classroom for community college; out front was a spacious plaza. “This is the community gathering place,” said Norman as we strolled across the plaza. “We’ll have a regular farmers’ market here so people can buy fresh fruits and vegetables. And underneath is a giant cistern, which will capture more storm runoff.” Pointing across the street to a row of two-story buildings, Norman said the ground-level units would house commercial and retail shops, “so people won’t have to drive a car to buy milk or have a coffee with a friend.”

“Preparing a community against climate change isn’t just about using green materials,” Norman said. “It’s about designing the built environment to integrate home, work, retail, and transit so people are less vulnerable to climate impacts and don’t have to use cars as much.” Norman cited a second housing project he had supervised, near the Microsoft campus in Redmond. “That’s a very desirable part of King County, with lots of good restaurants and amenities, but who was going to wash the dishes and cut the grass?” he asked. “Entry-level workers couldn’t afford to live within thirty miles of the place, so they were all driving their junkers every day, spewing pollution.” The Village at Overlake Station was the first transit-oriented development of its kind in the United States, said Norman. Completed in 2002, it added 308 affordable housing units near the Overlake bus transit center. “We now average 0.6 cars

per household in that neighborhood, compared to 1.2 cars in similar neighborhoods,” said Norman. “That’s what transit-oriented development can do to fight climate change.”