

A CALL TO NEW ACTION
By Gary Werner, Cranes President

Dear Fellow Environmentalists:

We are in a global environmental crisis of catastrophic proportions and consequences. The most dramatic and frightening manifestation of this crisis is the destabilization of global climate brought about by our pollution of the atmosphere with greenhouse gases. However, this “climate change” problem is but a symptom of the underlying cause of the crisis – our over-consumption of the resources the earth provides to sustain us. We are consuming everything from fossil fuels to groundwater to forests, wildlife, soil, and land at a rate that is unsustainable. And we are wreaking havoc on the earth’s climate, water systems, nutrient cycles, wondrous diversity of species, and on ourselves – our health, both physical and psychological -- in the process. For decades, we have squandered the essential resources our descendants will need to survive. We are literally killing the planet.

We increasingly see consequences of our over-consumption of resources – including land – here in Dane County and of the convergence of local and global actions to cause major impacts here at home. For instance, over the past several years we have experienced record breaking rain storms and 100 year floods in successive years. Global climate change and the impacts of local land use decisions and development patterns converged to produce these floods.

We have come to realize that overdevelopment along the Upper Yahara River in northern Dane County has catastrophic impacts to communities along the River and its lakes in central and southern Dane County. Similarly we now realize that locating a major employment center, such as Epic, with thousands of workers out on the far edge of the metropolitan area has badly distorted and overloaded our transportation infrastructure. Besides the daily annoyance of frustrating commutes or the displacement from flooded homes that diminish the quality of lives, these impacts of past bad decisions are becoming extremely costly. We cannot seem to tax ourselves enough to keep the roads and bridges in good repair nor build enough new lanes to keep up with the consumption habits of automobile dependent development patterns.

Despite the current recession developers are seeking approval for more sprawling automobile-dependent developments in nearly every city in Dane County. Some communities are facing multiple proposals. Many of these proposed developments, if approved, will sprawl into the headwater areas of the Yahara and Sugar Rivers, Black Earth, Dorn, Token, and Starkweather Creeks, threatening the quality of the water they carry and the wetlands and springs that recharge them. Many of these proposed developments will damage or destroy prairie, oak savanna, and woodlands identified as critical resources for preservation in the *Dane County Parks and Open-Space Plan*. Most of these proposed developments will continue our decades-long practice of paving over some of the most fertile soil in America to “plant” suburban houses rather than crops for food and biofuels, and habitat for wildlife and groundwater infiltration.

We are running out of places to sprawl our communities into without disrupting the essential water systems and destroying the agriculture we need to sustain us. We need to conserve our resources and build our communities and live our lives in ways that do so daily.

Many people and organizations are mounting heroic efforts to preserve specific places or to adopt specific policies and practices that will conserve our resources and allow us to live more lightly on the planet, reduce our “carbon footprint,” etc. Despite these good efforts we increasingly find that we are fighting the same battles over and over again. We need to find ways to address the root causes of the problems we are creating for our environment and ourselves. We need to find and implement overarching solutions in public policy and practice that will prevent the battles we wage daily now from occurring tomorrow.

In this crisis of threats we have opportunities to dramatically change the way we build our communities and live in Dane County that we did not have before.

We have the newly chartered **Capital Area Regional Planning Commission** and **Regional Transit Authority**. We have growing interest in and support for county-wide Transfer of Development Rights and Purchase of Development Rights programs to preserve agricultural and other critical resource lands. We have well developed Community Supported Agriculture and "Support Local Agriculture" movements through local co-operatives, farmers markets, and other Dane County programs. Our "waste" recycling programs are strong and about to grow with the construction of Dane County sponsored manure and food digesters. The University of Wisconsin and Madison Gas & Electric Company are about to eliminate burning coal and largely switch to renewable energy sources. The Wisconsin Legislature is considering legislation from the Governor's Global Warming Task Force that will mandate significantly higher energy conservation and efficiency requirements.

Through these new institutions, pilot projects, codes, ordinances, and mandates we are poised to be able to implement the over-arching solutions in public policy and practice that will set us on a course to transform our Dane County community into an environmentally sustainable, locally supported one, if ...

To make the needed changes in public policy that will guide our transformation into sustainability we need to devise a way to sustain a consistent collective effort among the community of environmental organizations here in Dane County and our region.

When we have made such an effort several times over the past several decades we have been successful in making dramatic changes in Dane County policy. For instance, in 1992, after several years of working together the *Dane County Greenspace Coalition* compelled the Dane County Board of Supervisors to adopt the *Dane County Greenspace Plan* – a plan that recognized for the first time the need to preserve large areas around the metropolitan area of Dane County for recreation, wildlife, and water protection and to link together these large preserves and smaller parks through a network of resource corridors.

Again, in 1999, many of the environmental organizations of Dane County worked together with newly elected County Executive Kathleen Falk to promote formal establishment of the Dane County Conservation Fund to purchase land for parks, conservancy areas, lake and stream protection, and recreational trails. The county-wide referendum we worked together to support was approved by 76% of the voters and prompted the Dane County Board of Supervisors to authorize spending \$30 million over 10 years for the Conservation Fund. The significantly increased funding allowed Dane County Parks to begin implementing the *Dane County Greenspace* and *Park and Open-Space Plans* at a faster rate and permanently preserve some critical areas for public benefit, just in "the nick of time." Much remains to be done to fully implement those plans.

The success we had in the Conservation Fund Referendum Campaign led Dane County Executive Kathleen Falk to invite leaders of Dane County environmental organizations to regularly meet with her and her staff to consult about issues, programs, and activities. We have been doing so every month since 1999 as the **Dane County Environmental Smart Growth Coalition**.

It is time that we take the next step to strengthen our ability as a community of environmentalists to help make the necessary public policy changes that will transform our Dane County community into a sustainable one.

Sincerely yours,



Gary Werner
CRANES Co-founder and President