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Low Impact Development Workshop

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Keynote Address

***Edens Lost & Found* and CDM: Creating “Cities of the Future”**

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Thank you for inviting me to participate in this workshop on low impact development (LID). I am pleased to be speaking with such an impressive panel from the regulatory, consulting, water management, and development communities. I was asked to talk about the PBS mini-series *Edens Lost & Found* and why CDM chose to support the program as its largest corporate underwriter.

This workshop is an appropriate venue to promote the achievements documented in *Edens Lost & Found*. To illustrate what I mean, let me quote from a very concise definition of low impact development:

“Low-impact development (LID) is . . . innovative technology to control stormwater quantity/quality impacts at the source using microscale management practices distributed and integrated throughout the landscape.”¹

With that definition in mind, think of *Edens Lost & Found* as a documentary record of some of the microscale “miracles” being accomplished by individuals and groups, distributed across the country, and fully-integrated into the urban landscapes and watersheds they inhabit, protect, restore, and enrich.

What is *Edens Lost & Found*?

The mini-series *Edens Lost & Found* is comprised of four hour-long episodes – each focused on a major American city. Those cities include: Chicago, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and Seattle (all four are CDM clients). Within each episode, a brief historical profile is combined with in-depth portraits of community activists, professionals, and government officials who are making a notable impact by improving their neighborhoods and cities. The series celebrates these individuals and tells the story of their setbacks and accomplishments. As important, it is a call to action for others interested in getting more involved in their own communities.

The series is produced by Harry Wiland and Dale Bell of Wiland-Bell Productions in Santa Monica, California. Individually, Harry and Dale have been the recipients of an

Academy Award for the film “Woodstock,” five Emmys, one Peabody Award, two Christopers, and two Cine Golden Eagles. They have made films together for PBS, network television, cable, and cinema.

Harry and Dale are a fundamental reason that CDM is sponsoring *Edens Lost & Found*. Both are dedicated to the transforming power of media in our society – believing that the ability to reach individuals in the privacy of their homes offers far-reaching public enrichment, education, and social change. Beyond broadcast television, Wiland-Bell’s multimedia approach includes a companion book, website, action guides, teaching curriculum, regional symposiums, and other on-going outreach activities. We hope to be affiliated with and supporting *Edens Lost & Found* for many years to come.

How did we get involved?

I was introduced to Harry by one of the subjects of the Los Angeles episode, Andy Lipkis, founder and president of a Los Angeles non-profit dedicated to urban forestry – called simply TreePeople (and that is one word).

Andy’s story is a fascinating one – like all of the subjects of *Edens Lost & Found*. He started planting trees in the smog and fire-ravaged hills surrounding LA when he was 15 years old, established TreePeople in the early 1970’s, and has dedicated his life to urban forestry. As you would expect, he has been awarded many honors, accomplished huge changes in Los Angeles, authored books, and even appeared on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson in a memorable moment that is re-capped in the Los Angeles episode and well-worth seeing.

I have known Andy since the late 1990’s, when my involvement in water resources planning in Los Angeles brought me into frequent contact with TreePeople and Andy himself. Over the years, we participated together in many stakeholder-driven planning processes. At an LA event, Andy and I were discussing ideas about integrated resource planning and the benefits that individuals can create when they are conscious of their impact on the urban ecology and choose to do something about it. Following that discussion, Andy put me in touch with Harry Wiland, and CDM’s involvement with *Edens Lost & Found* was launched.

Why Support *Edens Lost & Found*?

When asked to think about why CDM sponsored *Edens Lost & Found*, I realized some of the reasons are obvious and others are more complex. As I mentioned earlier, the shows focus on cities where we are active. In every case, our clients play a role in the story of each city. Clients like Seattle Public Utilities, the Philadelphia Water Department’s Office of Watersheds, the City of Chicago, and the City of Los Angeles Bureau of Sanitation are all featured for their proactive efforts to restore and revitalize their urban environments.

Furthermore, we have worked with many of the citizen activists and groups portrayed in the series. I already mentioned Andy. I could add Blaine Bonham, Jennifer Wolch, Mike Mullin, Melanie Winter, and others to that list – all of whom deserve the recognition provided by the series.

Finally, CDM has worked on related projects and programs including integrated resource planning in Los Angeles, LID in Philadelphia, recycling in Chicago, and water treatment in Seattle. In every case, there are many CDM stories to tell that intersect with the lives and interests of the people pictured in the series. These are all some of the obvious reasons to support *Edens Lost & Found*.

As the series developed, however, we saw deeper reasons to think about the message of *Edens Lost & Found* – all related to the people themselves and the role real people play in our professional lives as planners, engineers, and architects. We often refer to real people as “stakeholders,” which is an interesting term. It focuses on the “stake” that individuals and organizations have in the results of a project or program – something to gain or lose, their interest or share in the outcome. It doesn’t communicate much about the integrity, imagination, creativity, courage, commitment, energy, humor, and a long list of other human values that are essential to the health and welfare of our communities.

On occasion, we have had clients who fear heavy involvement of citizen stakeholders in their decision-making processes. They expect the worst – chaos, delays, opposition to action, public controversy, “hijacked” projects, and bad publicity. Our corporate experience is that when done correctly, fully-integrated stakeholder involvement is the best means of preventing all of those outcomes from occurring. Further, when we begin to rely heavily on non-structural and microscale solutions to complement our large scale infrastructure, we must include the community; listen to what is important to them; and engage them for the long-haul of implementation, maintenance, and care for the small-scale features that we count on to provide a reliable level of service to our customers.

Why? Because real people ensure that microscale solutions work and are maintained. The shift reflected in our commitment to LID and other demand management practices that reduce resource dependence and the need for infrastructure redefines our relationship with the communities we serve. We need their help with microscale, distributed solutions, and we need their help with large scale infrastructure as well.

Developing Multi-Benefit, Multi-Purpose Infrastructure Projects

Our challenge is to create greater economic and social returns from projects designed primarily to protect and improve the environment. Reliability and compliance are the minimum expectation. We need to do more. This means that every project needs to be viewed as a multi-purpose, multi-benefit opportunity. Triple bottom line performance should be expected from every institution in our society, and we need the help and creativity of citizens in delivering those benefits on traditional civil, sanitary, and hydraulic infrastructure projects.

When we acknowledge the legitimacy of multi-benefit projects, we must engage the community regarding their values, interests, and needs (both economic and social). This is where our stakeholders become critical contributors to and advocates for the multi-purpose solutions that creative planners, architects, and engineers can produce.

When we think of LID and more integrated approaches to planning and urban design, we visualize communities that are served by less large-scale infrastructure, places that conserve significant natural resources and habitat, and maintain a balanced water budget by preventing direct connections between impervious surfaces and drainage-ways wherever possible.

As we transition from depending solely on “command-and-control” structural solutions to those that restore or mimic natural systems, we must rely on the most dynamic force in the natural landscape – its human inhabitants – to help. Those institutions and utilities that have met constituent and rate-payer needs as “invisible infrastructure” will need to reacquaint themselves with the partners needed to function in an “integrated” world.

Whether we state it explicitly or not, we are asking for more understanding, engagement, and stewardship from ourselves and our customers. We are looking for supportive leadership and volunteers in every community. We don’t need everyone everywhere, but we do need someone everywhere. The new world of low impact development and long-term sustainability is going to force us into a partnership with the people we serve. We are going to do it *with* our customers and not simply *for* them.

These are some of the deeper, intrinsic reasons why CDM supports *Edens Lost & Found*. With all that said, there are real challenges that heavy reliance on stakeholder involvement create for the established institutions of government, private-sector development, and municipal utilities.

Recognizing the Conflicts between Individuals and Institutions

Integrated planning and program approaches often highlight the conflict that exists between institutional authority, with its desire to deliver uniform benefits to the broader community, versus the infinite variability and eccentricity of individuals and small groups – however effective they may be in their homes and neighborhoods. The dilemma is an old one and pits the individual against established norms and authority. The activist’s side of the debate is summed up in the aphorism:

“I would rather be cured by a quack, than poisoned to death by a properly qualified doctor . . .”²

The heroes of *Edens Lost & Found* (in most cases) are not properly qualified doctors, but they have found effective and often unconventional cures for what’s ailing their communities. Cures that venture to the limits of the properly constituted boundaries of their local communities – at least as those boundaries are defined by local building codes, public health and safety ordinances, and established environmental regulations.

In the Philadelphia segment, Mary Seton Corboy, founder of Greensgrow, a struggling but successful organic farm on the site of a former galvanized steel plant, puts it like this:

“If I had had any indication at all of how hard it was going to be, the truth is I wouldn’t have gotten started. It’s interesting: People say you’re a pioneer. Now you’re a pioneer, initially you’re just a nut case.”³

As we work to incorporate LID principles into the institutional framework of our cities and counties, we need to be careful to leave room for the innovative, eccentric, and sometimes unsuccessful attempts of individuals and small groups to make positive change. Every new prototype project will not prove to be a best practice. For the professional community of planners, architects, and engineers, taking that kind of risk usually is not acceptable. We have a lot of work ahead of us in dealing with the liability issues associated with innovation in our development practices – particularly if we are striving for wide acceptance and public support.

Communication and Collaboration with Citizen Activists

I knew many of the individuals in the Los Angeles episode before I ever saw them on the screen. They are the citizen activists of the community. They don’t take “I don’t know” for an answer; and in most cases they are not thrilled about “no” either. We need to get comfortable with the conflict and occasional emotional moments that arise from engaging in dialogue with diverse stakeholder groups with competing, strongly-held views.

Developing the facilitation skills that allow us to improve the quality of the dialogue within communities is an important challenge.

When I use the word dialogue, I am sticking closely to the literal definition. That is “seeking mutual understanding and harmony.” I was introduced to this concept in a great book by Daniel Yankelovich entitled: “The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation.”⁴

Yankelovich differentiates between dialogue and debate? He describes three characteristics of dialogue, which I are critical to successful communication and collaboration with citizen stakeholders in the public sector.

First he describes the equality of participants and the absence of coercive influences. “In genuine dialogue, there is no arm-twisting, no pulling of rank, no hint of sanctions for holding politically incorrect attitudes, no coercive influences of any sort, whether overt or indirect.”⁵

He describes the need to listen with empathy – “the ability to think someone else’s thoughts and feel someone else’s feelings.”⁶

And finally he describes the need to bring assumptions into the open. “Dialogue must be concerned with bringing forth people’s most deep-rooted assumptions.”⁷

Equality, empathy, and search for “deep-rooted assumptions” are all hallmarks of the work of Harry Wiland and Dale Bell – and in that respect they are models for our own interactions with citizen activists. It’s another reason to watch the shows.

Let me finish with a discussion of the relationship between *Edens Lost & Found* and one of the most intangible and important ingredients in all we do for our communities and neighbors.

Final Thoughts: Building Hope for the Future

I had an opportunity to visit the flood impacted neighborhoods of New Orleans recently with a graduate student from the MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning and a representative from Providence Community Housing. Following a long ride through endless blocks of ruin, we visited two sites where Providence and MIT (together with the AFL-CIO Investment Trust Corp., JPMorgan Chase, Fannie Mae, Tulane University's School of Architecture, New Orleans Habitat for Humanity, and NeighborWorks America) are constructing three prototype modular homes in advance of launching a manufactured housing program that could add 900 subsidized homes in the Treme/Lafitte neighborhood of New Orleans.

We had seen incomprehensible and overwhelming destruction – blocks of destroyed homes and broken lives – knowing that it was but a small sample of the 132,000 ruined properties in New Orleans. Against that backdrop, three new homes held our full attention and offered what might be considered foolish hope for recovery and progress in the city. I would argue that we have an important role cultivating the imagination, creativity, and innovation that leads to our faith in progress – the belief in a better tomorrow than yesterday. That attitude is something that we must not take for granted.

To illustrate, let me make a big shift in space and time (and get a little more personal as well) from New Orleans in 2006 to Anaheim in 1958 – to Walt Disney’s Tomorrowland. And just to make it more complicated, not the Tomorrowland of today, but Tomorrowland then – because it was different then. Some of my most basic beliefs about “progress” were sparked by the “imagineering” of that now lost Tomorrowland and its old-style “multi-media model” – which kept our AV club going.

When I visited Disneyland in 1958, I was fascinated by the TWA Moonliner that towered over Tomorrowland and provided the gateway to the “Rocket to the Moon” ride. Disney’s Man in Space exhibit was developed with the help of real science pioneers like Wernher von Braun.⁸ The monorail system (opened in 1959) wasn’t just a ride, it was a real attempt to apply cutting-edge transportation technology and make the “future” real in the present.

And then there was the Monsanto House of the Future. Open from 1957 to 1967, this house looked like a sort of square plastic mushroom, comprised of four white fiberglass wings resting on top of a wide central column. It was also designed in collaboration with M.I.T. and celebrated the miracles of plastics. That house and its architecture fascinated me. It was the first time that I saw creations of the imagination made part of real life.

Walt Disney made me a nine-year-old believer that we could send a man to the moon if we put our minds to it. I am very grateful for that naïve optimism. I grew up in an era that fostered confidence in the concept of “progress” and the power of “imagination.”

I know it wasn't all Disneyland then. Those days were haunted by a “cold war” with the Soviet Union. Bomb shelters were popular, and we all practiced crouching under our desks preparing for a nuclear attack. I remember all of that too. In many respects, the anxieties and threats of recent history have always had their precedents in the past.

At the same time, we were taught to believe that we could make a difference, could make a better world, could in fact “improve the environment and infrastructure” – as our corporate mission statement boldly asserts. Many of the heroes of *Edens Lost & Found* are the products of that generation. They have not given up and neither should we.

For today's third graders, the exhibits that demonstrate the excitement and possibilities of progress are no longer in Disneyland, but they are documented in *Edens Lost & Found*. They are at places like the green roof on city hall in Chicago, or Michael Howard's Eden Place Nature Center in Fuller Park, or the amazing Lily Yeh's Village of the Arts and Humanities in North Philadelphia, or TreePeople's demonstration project in the Crenshaw District of Los Angeles, or three simple modular homes being built by students in New Orleans. These are examples of progress as compelling as the House of the Future was in 1958. They offer tangible evidence of our ability to “imagineer” new solutions, to improve on the past, to realize our dreams. We need to promote and celebrate them because we need far-reaching cultural messages of hope in the future.

These are some of the reasons we are supporting *Edens Lost & Found* and the citizen heroes it portrays. We need their individuality, imagination, creativity, commitment, and stubborn hope for the future – as much as we need their stories to be told. We will be challenged to integrate those ingredients into the often bureaucratic institutions that comprise the public and private sectors of our economy. But with their help, I am confident that those of you who are interested in and committed to approaches like LID will, like Walt Disney, “imagineer” a better future and create the “brand-new thing” that meets our needs for this generation and generations to come. Be inspired and inspire others. That's the message of *Edens Lost & Found*. It's my greeting and message to you.

Thank you for having me here today.

¹ France, Robert Lawrence. *Handbook of Water Sensitive Planning and Design*. Baton Rouge: Lewis Publishers, 2002. p. 297.

² Brutus, Stephanus Junius. *Vindiciae, contra tyrannos: or, Concerning the Legitimate Power of a Prince over the People, and of the People over a Prince*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994. (Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought) p.141.

³ Wiland, Harry and Bell, Dale. *Edens Lost & Found: How Ordinary Citizens are Restoring Our Great American Cities*. (White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2005). p.120

⁴ Daniel Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict Into Cooperation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999).

⁵ Yankelovich, p. 42.

⁶ Yankelovich, p. 43.

⁷ Yankelovich, p.44.

⁸ Thomas, *Walt Disney: An American Original*, p. 255.