

Earth Day 2018 and Sustainable Existence on our Planet

April 8, 2018

Dear Mayor Schaaf,

This letter is follow-up to the one I wrote to you for Earth Day 2017.

Sustainable Existence on Our Planet

Oakland will observe Earth Day on April 21, 2018. Earth Day is dedicated to the health of our Planet and to our sustainable existence on it. Sustainability refers to the population size which our Planet can **sustain indefinitely**. It can sustain a larger population at subsistence levels at which per capita resource requirements are low than it can at higher standards of living such as those of the United States and western Europe today at which per capita resource requirements are much higher. Our standard of living includes environmental amenities we choose such as open space for species preservation (biodiversity) and the preservation of wilderness; these environmental amenities add to our quality of life and happiness.

U.S. and World Populations Are Not Sustainable.

Studies (such as those at www.npg.org/forum-papers2.html) appear regularly and present the same conclusion: **the current world population of 7.6 billion and the current United States population of 327 million are far too large to be sustainable.** It is very noteworthy that studies have **not** appeared which challenge these conclusions and which posit, for example, that the sustainable world population is 9.8 billion or that the sustainable United States population is 438 million as they are forecast to be by 2050. (Immigration is expected to account for 82% of U.S. population growth by 2050.) Instead of challenging these studies, **growth enthusiasts just ignore them** and with tunnel vision plow full-speed ahead on our population and economic growth trajectory.

What U.S. and World Population Levels Are Sustainable?

U.S. and world populations are already much larger than sustainable levels, and we are sentencing future generations to a dystopian existence -- at best. Reputable studies have consistently found the sustainable world population to be about 2 billion if all our Planet's human residents enjoyed a European standard of living (which requires about half the consumption levels of the average American). **Our Planet's current population is 7.6 billion, almost four times the sustainable level.** The sustainable U.S. population is approximately 150-200 million people. This was our nation's size in 1970 which scientists agree is sustainable for our resources and will allow us to protect our fragile ecosystems, conserve our finite resources, and ensure a livable America for future generations. **The current U.S. population is 327 million, roughly twice the sustainable level.**

Grave Implications of These Studies Ignored

Given the grave implications of these studies, you would expect there would be urgent discussions of what populations levels are sustainable -- even if we claim that nothing can be done to control population growth. But there is **NO** discussion whatsoever. The United States has no population policy, and the question of what the optimum size should be has never been addressed by any administration. No political party and no politician at the national, state or local levels, **including Oakland**, want to touch this **most basic issue: what population levels are sustainable at our lowest acceptable standard of living.** Yet this issue is fundamental to the future of the nation as it is faced with diminishing supporting resources.

Instead We Pursue Growth with Tunnel Vision.

We are already in the second quarter of 2018, and politicians at all levels continue to

avoid mentioning **this most basic issue**. Rather they and their economists call for faster economic growth -- which is not just bad advice but dangerous advice. Walter Youngquist writes (December 2016, p.4),

"Growth is the idol that nearly all economists worship – there must be continued growth in sales and profits. Consumers must consume more. The Federal Reserve Board of the United States is committed to continued growth in the economy and strives by means of low interest rates to stimulate growth. If a company does not grow, it is shunned by investors.

"A no-growth, steady state economy is unimaginable to most economists – a notable exception being Herman Daly, who has long advocated a steady state economy. The idea is ignored. But an economy that continues to grow must consume more and more natural resources, only to exacerbate the increasing rate of a decline in both quantity and quality of these resources"

Businesses have a deep-seated and unquestioning faith in population growth. More people mean more available workers, more customers, more sales, and more profits, especially quarterly profits -- regardless of the long-term consequences of unsustainable population levels. In fact, faster economic growth in the U.S. in recent decades compared to that in European countries and Japan has been driven largely by faster population growth, not by a substantial rise in the standard of living of average middle-class and lower middle-class Americans.

The Economy Is Totally Dependent on the Environment, not Vice Versa.

Measures to help the environment are vigorously opposed by some political factions if

these measures might impede economic growth. I wrote on this topic in the attached Aug 2011 paper on economic competitiveness.

"Members of Congress and business representatives regularly oppose measures to protect the environment because these measures might 'hurt the economy.' It is dismaying to read this. Don't they consider that the economy depends on the environment (or more generally the Earth's carrying capacity), not the other way around? The environment would do just fine without the economy, but not the other way around. Or as the Prince of Wales put it, 'the economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of Nature and not the other way around' (*Newsweek*, 12/14/2009)."

Population Growth and CO₂ Emissions

On April 21, 2018, you and other political leaders will preside over Oakland's Earth Day event and will talk about the need to take care of our Planet. However, the well-being of our Planet and our sustainable existence on it are dependent upon the demands we make upon it, and these demands are a function of population size and per-capita resource use. We cannot preserve the health of our Planet just by making per capita reductions in demands on our Planet, e.g., per capita reductions in CO₂ emissions, if population growth negates these reductions. Energy-saving technology has reduced per capita carbon dioxide emissions since the first Earth Day (April 22, 1970). Total emissions are higher, however, because of population growth. (Please see papers by Edwin S. Rubenstein, "The Impact of U.S. Population Growth On Global Climate Change" and by Leon Kolankiewicz, "Earth Day and Population: A Missed Opportunity" at www.npg.org/forum-papers2.html)

You, Mayor Schaaf, and our Governor Jerry Brown proudly see yourselves as leaders in the fight to reverse climate change which the Trump administration apparently does not

think is a problem. But your support for population growth, whether direct or indirect, belies your opposition to global warming.

Can We Move to Sustainable Population Levels to Help Future Generations?

The current U.S population of 327 million is roughly twice the sustainable level of approximately 150-200 million people. So, the first step toward a more sustainable U.S. population would be to stabilize our population at its current level and then gradually reduce it. This will be difficult for U.S. residents to accomplish: The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that immigration will become the “primary driver of U.S. population growth” between 2027 and 2038. Immigration is expected to account for 82% of U.S. population growth by 2050.

There are humanitarian reasons for allowing high levels of immigration to the U.S., but the dominant reasons advanced are economic. Businesses say that they have to import workers ranging from computer programmers to dishwashers and everything in between to remain competitive.

Computer Programmers

Silicon Valley regularly reports that about two-thirds or more of its computer programmers are foreign-born. This is indeed remarkable given that California has a population of 40 million, has a widely-admired system of higher education (its three-tier system), and is much more racially and ethnically diverse than the countries which are providing us with programmers.

Construction Workers

Jared Bernstein (who was the Chief Economist and Economic Adviser to Vice President Joseph Biden in the Obama Administration) wrote, “Compared to less-educated Hispanic immigrants, white and black high-school dropouts have not been nearly as heavily employed in construction.” (Eberstadt, pp. 173-174) What Bernstein observed from a national perspective can be readily observed in California and Oakland. Employers claim there is a shortage of construction workers because not enough native-born whites, blacks, Asians, or Latinos will do this work.

So according to business, California’s current population of 40 million (which is among the most diverse in the world) is not large enough to provide the workforce the state needs. (To put this in perspective, California’s population in 1950 was 10,586,223.) So, the state’s population has to keep growing so our economy can keep growing. This line of thinking is bad for our Planet and bad for future generations. The most important question business and all of us should ask is: What is the sustainable population of our state, not how large a population we need to provide the workers business says it needs.

(Comparisons to California’s population of 40 million: Canada, 36.3 million; Australia, 24.1 million; Sweden, 9.9 million; Israel, 8.5 million; Denmark, 5.7 million; Ireland, 4.8 million; Estonia, a Baltic high-tech center (Skype and much more), 1.3 million.)

Less Diverse Nations with Smaller Populations

Are Beating Us Economically.

This paper is about sustainable population levels, not economic competitiveness. This section will be a short digression. As written in the previous section, business claims that we have to import “smart” workers and lots of other workers to be competitive in world markets. Importing workers adds to our diversity, giving us an advantage, they say. But is this strategy working?

The following five countries have smaller populations and much less diverse populations than the U.S. but do not import lots of workers. Yet they are beating us economically, invalidating our claims that with a population of 327 million we have to import lots of workers to be competitive. (Data cited is for 2016.)

- Japan has a population about 39% of that of the U.S., but they had a trade surplus with us of \$68.9 billion.
- Taiwan has a population about 7% of that of the U.S., but they had a trade surplus with us of \$12 billion.
- South Korea has a population about 15% of that of the U.S., but they had a trade surplus with us of \$27.7 billion.
- Vietnam has a population about 28% of that of the U.S., but they had a trade surplus with us of \$32 billion.
- Germany has a population about 25% of that of the U.S., but they had a trade surplus with us of \$65 billion.

Native-born residents of these nations are the source of the computer programmers and engineers and other technical workers these nations need to successfully compete economically. Their native-born residents are also the source of the workers who do roofing and construction, wash dishes in restaurants, work in retirement homes, work in agriculture, etc. This occurs because the price mechanism in these countries adjusts and allocates sufficient wages to these jobs so that workers will do them. Such market adjustment of wages often does not occur (or usually does not occur) in the United States because of the readily available supply of low-cost imported labor. This situation has also contributed to the phenomenon of “Men Without Work” in the United States (book by Nicholas Eberstadt, 2016; the aforementioned Jared Bernstein was a commentator to this book). “Men Without Work” are among the occupants of homeless camps.

What Has Occurred Between Earth Day 2017 and Earth Day 2018?

During the last year, concerns about the sustainability of our way of life and about the health of our Planet have been drowned out by the housing shortage issue. Almost daily, there have been articles and reports about what we need to do to build more housing for our growing population so we can keep our economy growing. One facet of this activity has been the YIMBY (Yes, In My Back Yard) movement which wants to squeeze more housing into urban areas. Another facet of this activity has been to try to build more housing in areas previously set aside for open space.

What has been **conspicuously absent** from all these calls for more housing for our growing population has been **questions raised** about what level of human activity, including housing, our Planet can take and still sustain our population at a standard of living like what we are accustomed to.

We Must Check with Our Planet First.

In the interests of future generations, we must check with our Planet first about what it can sustain before we proceed with our plans to, for example, cram more people into urban areas. Even when they are stacked in high-rise residential buildings, Americans use a lot of resources – which we depend on our Planet to provide. It is noteworthy that because NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) indirectly militates against population growth, it helps our Planet and future generations while YIMBY has the opposite effect.

(At a personal level, increasing urban population densities makes an already difficult street parking situation here in the Oakland flatlands really tough.)

40 Million and Growing, Housing, and Sustainable Existence on Our Planet

Sustainability refers to the population size our Planet can **sustain indefinitely at our lowest acceptable standard of living**. The sustainable U.S. population is approximately

150-200 million people. In 1970, our nation's size of 205 million was close to the sustainable range. It's population in 2018 is 327 million, about 60% beyond sustainability. In 1970, California's population was a bit less than 20 million. It's population in 2018 is 40 million. Assuming California parallels the nation, its population is now about 100% beyond sustainability. To foster sustainable existence on our Planet, the nation and California need to first stabilize their populations and then gradually reduce them.

Sustainability has a relatively long-term perspective – although the “long-term” we face may be just generations. This is how long we can get away with taking more from our Planet than it can restore. Many people, however, are more focused on the here-and-now. Even if one is concerned mainly about living conditions now, not generations into the future, arguments can be made for stabilizing California's population, especially the Bay Area which is pretty much built-out. The signs are abundant:

- There are daily reports on the housing crisis, with demand far exceeding supply. The reports include stories about buyers writing personal letters to sellers, pleading their case why the seller should sell to them.
- Houses for sale are on the market for just a short time, often less than a week, before they are sold.
- Houses are selling at 60% above asking price.
- There are reports that \$500,000 “starter” homes are becoming a rarity.

- Even well-paid Silicon Valley engineers are hard pressed to buy a home near where they work: a \$216,181 household salary is required to buy a median-priced house in the San Jose metro area, while \$171,330 is needed to buy a typical home in the San Francisco metro. That's assuming a 20 percent down payment on a 30-year fixed loan, says a Nov. 2017 study.
- People who made the considerable effort to relocate to Silicon Valley (and the greater Bay Area) are leaving the area. In 2015, 2,000 new residents per month came to Silicon Valley. In 2016, 42 per month are leaving. There are reports of shortages of rental trucks available for moves out of Silicon Valley, but not for moves into it. Colorado is often cited as the destination of those fleeing Silicon Valley and the Bay Area.

So, both those with a longer-term concern about sustainable existence on our Planet and those whose concern is living conditions in the here-and-now have an interest in stabilizing California's population at 40 million. Will this happen? Unfortunately, it does not look promising. Business says that native-born residents do not provide a wide range of workers California needs, from computer programmers to dishwashers and everything in between, to remain competitive. So, the state has to import these workers. And, of course, these workers and their families need somewhere to live which adds to the demand side of the housing situation.

As written earlier, however, the most important question business and all of us should ask is: What is the sustainable population of our state, not how large a population we need to provide the workers business says it needs. **We must check with our Planet first.**

Will Oakland Take the Lead Toward Sustainable Existence on Our Planet?

To restate: No politician at the national, state or local levels, **including Oakland**, wants to touch this **most basic issue: what population levels are sustainable at our lowest acceptable standard of living.**

Dear Mayor Schaaf: I ask you to please take the lead in at least thinking about these issues and discussing them and getting others to think about them and discuss them. Unless we take measures to achieve more sustainable population levels, future generations will face **a dystopian existence -- at best.**

Breaking the Taboo on Earth Day, April 2018

I trust that you and other thinking people of goodwill will finally break the taboo against discussing sustainable population levels at Oakland's 2018 Earth Day event. I remain hopeful we will not corroborate physicist Albert Einstein's assessment of human intelligence: " Only two things are infinite, the universe and human stupidity, and I'm not sure about the former."

Thank you,

William E. Jackman, Ph.D.

Statistician / SAS & SQL Programmer

Oakland, California

April 8, 2018

I am a second-generation Irish-American who grew up with immigrant Irish grandparents and aunts in Oakland. I am a graduate of Oakland High School and am fluent in Spanish.

Addendum on Trade and Sustainable Existence on Our Planet

Sustainable existence on our Planet entails minimizing our demands on it when possible. This includes international trade. There are large environmental costs, for example, when the U.S. transports scrap metal and paper to China, China uses them to manufacture and package toasters, microwave ovens, exercise machines, power tools, etc., and then transports them back to us. It would be better for our Planet if we manufactured the toasters here, obviating the round-trip transportation and its toll on our Planet.

Some international trade is appropriate even when the health of our Planet is taken into account. Examples:

- Guatemala, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Colombia, and Honduras have a natural advantage over the U.S. in growing bananas while U.S. has a natural advantage in growing wheat and corn. So, international trade makes sense environmentally.
- Natural resources availability varies between countries, e.g., tungsten (which makes cell phones vibrate). So, international trade makes sense environmentally.
- Some countries are too small to realize economies of scale necessary for certain industries, for example, auto manufacturing. So, international trade makes sense environmentally. (The U.S., in contrast, has large internal markets which can support a wide range of domestic manufacturers.)

Returning to the first paragraph of this section, China has no natural advantages over the United States in making toasters, microwave ovens, exercise machines, power tools, etc., which would justify the heavy environmental cost of the round-trip transportation. The technology for making these items is available to the U.S. and other countries; in fact, the U.S. may have invented it.

Some history:

- The American Industrial Revolution started in 1790.
- By 1890, the USA surpassed Britain for first place in manufacturing output.
- The industrialization of China (in modern times) began around 1960.

Source of Quotes

Eberstadt, Nicholas, "Men Without Work", 2016.

Youngquist, Walter, "Framework of the Future", December 2016, www.npg.org/forum-papers2.html