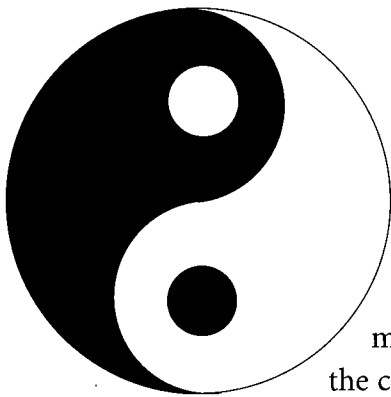


Merging the Yin with the Yang

Ken Hampian

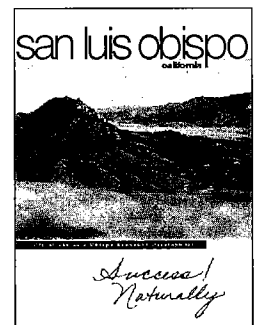


ver the years, San Luis Obispo, California (population 42,000, located on the central coast of California), has had some epic struggles between its “yin” and its “yang”—that is, between its economic and its environmental sensibilities. Therefore, in 1995, when the city council created the positions of economic development manager and natural resources manager, with supervision of the positions assigned to me, I was not sure if it was the beginning of a great new adventure or the beginning of the end!

A Sensitive Experiment

The council created the positions at the urging of separate economic and environmental constituencies but against the recommendation of staff. Given the historic tensions between our community’s economic and environmental interests, we on the staff feared that the positions, if overly politicized, would become divisive. We worried that some members of both constituencies were promoting these new officials more as activists and independent advocates for their causes than as professional staff members. Yes, we were being worry warts but not entirely without reason.

Councilmembers, on the other hand, were more idealistic.



A San Luis Obispo marketing brochure accentuates the economic development and natural resources collaboration.

They believed that by creating positions representing both interests, we would integrate community efforts in these areas in a more compatible way. And guess what? They were right! On the whole, the experiment has worked extremely well, with virtually no conflict between the two programs or positions.

While the council deserves almost all of the credit, the city's success wasn't only because of sound political intuition. It also took hard staff work and some persuasion to ensure that the job descriptions and the recruitment and selection processes were carefully developed and carried out in a professional way.

We also had to be sure that everything was equal and balanced between the two positions, including levels of responsibility and authority, minimum qualifications, salaries, office space, and so on. In fact, the positions became affectionately known to staff as "the twins." But the fundamental idea that city government could proactively pursue both economic and environmental interests simultaneously and productively has proved to be a correct one.

Unfortunately, too many local governments today are polarized by political "wholly wars." That is, policy choices always are between those that are seen as either "wholly good" or "wholly evil."

Some Valuable Gains

It doesn't have to be this way. Here are just a few examples of how our community has been able to integrate economic and environmental interests in achieving our major goals and aspirations:

- General funds of \$200,000 are allocated to San Luis Obispo's open space program annually, with one-half of that amount contingent on obtaining matching-grant funds. General fund money is available thanks to our strong local economy, including per-capita sales tax revenue that is well above average.
- More than \$2 million in grant funds have been secured for open space

purposes since 1996, resulting in three major greenbelt purchases, with several others pending. One of these purchases, Bishop Peak, is treasured by the community and has attracted more than \$50,000 in citizen donations.

- Because our hotel/motel tax is a critically important general fund revenue, promoting tourism is a high priority. In partnership with the tourism industry, our natural resource program recently held a statewide urban streams conference in our town, filling local hotel rooms with several hundred guests during our off-peak season.
- Offering some development permits in exchange for substantial open space dedications has become an accepted approach for annexing properties. During the past two years alone, 600 acres within the greenbelt have been protected in this fashion.
- Two contiguous annexations totaling 1,500 acres now are pending that will meet significant general-plan goals for housing and economic development. Of the total acreage, approximately 400 acres is designated for park and open space purposes. The city's economic development manager has the lead in working with area property owners (there are more than 200). On the other hand, the natural resources manager has the lead in administering the open space component of the land use plan, which involves sensitive resource protection and the restoration of currently degraded open areas.
- An open space fee has been adopted for annexations within this large expansion area, with the proceeds to be invested in a new greenbelt along the southern edge, to prevent future sprawl into a pristine rural valley.
- A committee consisting primarily of businesspeople but with environmental representation has established a strong consensus and unanimous council agreement for target-indus-

try recruitment goals; the desired industries are software/multimedia; light manufacturing; medical technology; space technology; electronics; tourism; and recreation.

- To pursue the targeted industries, an economic development marketing strategy has been developed to promote the strongest attraction: quality of life, which is the factor identified by the business community as the most important recruitment "incentive." The marketing program motto is, of course: "Success. Naturally!"
- The chamber of commerce and a local environmental organization, the Environmental Center of San Luis Obispo, have joined forces to produce a report that advocates opposition to federal offshore oil development leases along our county coastline. In addition to the environmental consequences of such leases, the potential detraction from the tourism industry is among the main arguments made by this impressive coalition.
- A nonprofit entity has been formed consisting of the state university, the local community college, high-tech entrepreneurs, the chamber of commerce, and city and county officials to establish a virtual business incubator. The purpose is to support fledgling high-tech companies by connecting them with the resources available at the university and college but without the complex and expensive impacts of constructing a brick-and-mortar facility.
- The staff meets in quarterly luncheons with each of two major environmental and business organizations to ensure that we are communicating effectively. These luncheons are informal but have contributed greatly to maintaining a consistent standard of rapport, trust, and rumor control.

Some Valuable Debates


Has there been conflict? Yes, some. In San Luis Obispo, there always will be tension between our economic and our

environmental interests, and issues will continue to be debated as we tackle various projects. Debates are almost always civil and thoughtful, however, and I think nearly everyone would agree that the council struggles mightily to balance the twin values of preserving the environment and generating economic opportunities for citizens.

The fact that we have formal programs and staffing in both areas also has demonstrated that we have been willing to back up our goals with real investment and action. So the city's commitments to the economy and to the environment are not questioned as much as they once were.

But the conflict between the two programs? Admittedly, there has been one. The economic development manager has been unsuccessful in recruiting a certain hamburger franchise most favored by the natural resource manager. But this small amount of conflict is a

testament to the professionalism and team orientation of the individuals we hired for the positions. It also has to do with the tone set by the council and the city administrator, whose commitment to the success of the experiment has never wavered. The programs have been supported equitably, and the positions have been shielded from the tougher aspects of the political process.

So, given my worst fears, I can honestly say that San Luis Obispo's experiment has been a great new adventure and one that other localities with similar objectives should seriously consider. 

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