

# BAILIWICK NEWS

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## Degrowth for the Centre Region: what could it look like?

By Katherine Watt

I recently shared an article by Charles Hugh Smith at the Bailiwick News Facebook page.

Smith's article was titled "The Planetary Insanity of Eternal Economic Growth," and it presents some counterculture thinking rooted in the anti-industrialism of Henry David Thoreau, up through E.F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* and into present day cultural currents including the voluntary simplicity and steady-state economy movements.

Unlike virtually all of my peers in the local eco-activist community, I think "sustainable development" is an oxymoron. Continued economic growth, with its concomitant continued destruction of farms, forests, wetlands and streams, is anything but inevitable. But it's widely seen as inevitable, because it's the only system Americans alive today have ever seen in action.

From the steady state perspective, what's really inevitable is a major collapse of the international financial system to accompany the ongoing fracturing of human social systems and non-human ecosystems, both of which are already disrupting complex supply chains at the regional and local level, and both of which will continue to hammer those supply chains.

The open question, in the steady-state view, is how a myriad of different local communities, eco-regions and nation-states will – or will not – plan for and cope with the loss of the complex, interconnected systems we've known for our entire lives.

I posted Smith's article with the comment:

"If elected to Borough Council, I plan to pursue degrowth policies. I will likely lose every such vote 6-1, because eternal economic growth and the irrelevance of intact ecosystems are delusions held by the vast majority of political power-holders.

But I'd still like to bring the degrowth perspective further into the public discussion, such as it is, and perhaps encourage other degrowth advocates to run for local office and build a council majority in a few years."

*Bailiwick* reader Roseann Kowaluk commented: "So what does degrowth look like?"

I posted the following reply:

It's hard to say at this point, because all of our existing systems (economic, political, social, transportation etc.) were developed in a context in which growth without too much blowback was possible.

It's only in the last 50 years or so that the inequality and ecological damage and other problems became broadly noticeable.

And it's only in the last 15 years or so that things started unraveling enough for a wide enough cross-section of US society to make it even preliminarily possible to think about how the growth imperative might be replaced with some other societal goal.

And of course, there are still many powerful interests that don't care about the suffering and increasing fragility of people and our life-support/ecosystems.

So, at a minimum, I want to bring the possibility of changing local goals from growth to stability (steady-state, population neutral) into the discussion on Borough Council and at COG.

I also want to bring another concept into the public debate. The benefits of economic growth (horizontal and vertical sprawl, increasing use of resources, increasing consumption of products, increasing dumping of waste into land, water, air) are predicated on the idea that making the overall economic "pie" larger will also increase the size of the "slice" that goes to the middle and lower-income groups.

That's debatable in itself, as shown by the past few decades of increasing inequality, concentrating gains for those who get to eat the top-income "slice."

But another way to think about de-growth is that it would aim to maintain the overall size of the local economic "pie" at a relatively stable total value (fluctuating slightly over time), while increasing the proportion of that pie that includes goods and services produced, consumed and disposed of by local workers and shoppers exchanging goods and services with each other through small and medium-size businesses, rather than importing goods and services from outside the area, and exporting money to large corporations.

Another piece I think about a lot is that de-growth, or shifting social arrangements toward a steady-state economy, in conjunction with the collapse of national and global economic systems and supply chains, will very much increase the proportion of the local population directly engaged in food production for local consumption.

In the late 1700s, farm families comprised about 90% of the American population. By 1920 or so, it was down to about 30%, but most people were still connected directly to a family farm in some fairly close way. Today it's somewhere around 2%. The drop was enabled by cheap fossil fuels. But affordable fossil fuel access is peaking. Which means that the percentage is going to bottom out and then turn back up.

I can easily imagine that within the next 10-20 years, the percentage of the Centre Region population directly engaged in food production at their own small home gardens or at small allotments and small to mid-size farms on the outskirts of the town boundaries will rise back up to about 25% or more.

But alongside that change in labor occupations, there will also have to be a change in compensation, so that families and laborers who farm full-time can afford to feed and house themselves from the profits of sale of the food they produce.

So figuring out ways to help the local market find the right price points for food and the right tax structures for stabilizing farmstead land prices will also be part of de-growth policy-making.

The main point is that we're at a turning point, so a lot of the big systems we currently have are falling apart while we have to propose, discuss and try out new, smaller systems.

Some of those new systems will be helpful to strengthening our local economy and ecosystems so they can support our local population, and some will not. Trial and error is the only method we have.

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