

Chesapeake Conservation Landscaping Council's  
3<sup>rd</sup> **Turning a New Leaf** Conference  
Friday, December 4, 2009  
George Washington University, Washington, DC

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS**

***D.C.'s Green Initiatives***

**The Honorable Anthony Williams**

The Keynote address was a loosely structured rumination by the former mayor of Washington, DC around three major points:

- Dominance of built environment in cities and the important role of landscape professionals in developing sustainable practices within cities.
- Loss of a sense of place, no significant differentiation among American cities
- City as a public realm and subsequent citizen responsibilities of stewardship

The speaker began with a brief history of American cities and his work with LSE Cities Programme and its recent meeting in Barcelona in 2004. The project brings academics, professionals, and members of government to different cities to discuss the city and information is available online:

[www2.lse.ac.uk/.../Press%20Release%20-%20European%20Mayors%202004.pdf](http://www2.lse.ac.uk/.../Press%20Release%20-%20European%20Mayors%202004.pdf)

According to the speaker, cities are entering a third cycle of growth and renewal. The first cycle followed the Chicago World's Fair around 1900 and investment in cities grew along with their populations. The second cycle in the life of cities was flight from inner cities during and after the era of the Interstate Highway Act (1957), during which time inner city populations were diminished by about 50% across the United States. The newest phase in these cycles of urban growth and change will occur in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: "We are entering the century of cities. 1900, 25% of world's population lived in cities. In another 20-25 years, 40-45% will live in the city," declared the speaker. The figures suggest that cities will affect dominant environmental impacts in terms of (a) carbon emissions and (b) habitat destruction.

The speaker underlined how cities and their corresponding grey infrastructure contributed significantly to habitat destruction. He used the example of the District of Columbia's stormwater sewage system and life in the Anacostia River. In the 1970's city officials thought the best practice for storm and sanitary sewers was to separate them in a massive underground reservoir containing both lines. Recent evidence points to overflow as the District's population increases and the carrying capacity of the system in severe rain events is reached. The former mayor pointed out that landscape professionals could really change the conversation with regard to the engineered dumping in the Anacostia watershed by pointing out the importance of vegetative

stormwater practices. Since 60% of the runoff south of Florida Avenue is in the hands of one owner, the Federal government, Williams pointed out that potential for greening the city to better handle stormwater could serve both the city's needs and as a model for other cities.

Williams continued by describing the increasingly monotonous urban and suburban landscape across America. In the new century, cities face the dilemma of distinguishing what is important to their identity with what they think they need to harmonize with every other city. Many places look increasingly alike "in a monotonous horrible way in my personal estimation," exclaimed the speaker. He criticized modern American cities for attempting to create uniform built environments that evidence national standards rather than rationalizing and using best practices from other cities to support internal administration such as payroll systems. Williams advocates more investment in the distinctive characteristics of cities. The District of Columbia is uniquely important for landscape professionals because its distinctiveness is tied to its greenness. Trees are unique to the capital city and should be treasured. The speaker praised Betty Casey's donation of \$50 million to ensure the future of the District's urban tree canopy via the Casey Trees Foundation. Ecological landscaping also provides economic benefits for the city such as increased real estate value.

The former mayor concluded his comments by discussing the importance of the city as a public realm. During his tenure as Mayor of Washington DC, 3500 to 4000 citizens attended his Mayor-Citizen Summits to describe their visions for the public realm. The problem of city pollution might be addressed by landscape professionals in the same manner – that of concerned citizens who believe that ecological design can significantly alter the future of the public realm for the better. His dream for cities is that we leave things better for the people who follow, because a clean city is very unique and can provide identity and definition for its inhabitants. He believes citizen professionals should and will come together for better cities.

[ Summary by Divya Kumar ]