

Sure, it sounds like a paradox. The environmental movement has done a lot of good for the planet and for pollution. But in the face of the greatest environmental threat of our time, the movement may be fundamentally ill-suited to tackle the climate crisis.

For most of its history, environmentalism has essentially been about stopping things, or at least slowing them down. Whether it's sprawling subdivisions, industrial development on sensitive habitat lands, or factories spewing pollution, environmentalists have mobilized support to prevent these projects from happening, or at least make them more efficient and therefore more expensive (think scrubbers on smokestacks or building efficiency codes). The successes are undeniable: significantly cleaner air and water and the prevention of some environmentally destructive projects.

But when it comes to fighting climate change, a movement designed to stopping things is counter-productive. We need the opposite dynamic, because our task now is to build our way toward reducing greenhouse gas emissions. That means building a significant amount of new housing, services, and job centers in urbanized areas near transit; building renewable energy facilities both locally and in rural regions; building new rail and busways through developed cities and towns; and fostering a regulatory environment where innovation in clean technologies can take place without years of delay and uncertainty brought on by often well-intentioned environmental laws.

Unfortunately, the broader environmental movement has helped to stymie each of these efforts. Whether it's resistance to loosening environmental review and land use requirements in infill areas, Clean Air Act impediments to on-farm renewables, or permitting processes for renewable energy projects, the movement has been schizophrenic at best, counter-productive at worst.

To be sure, there are many environmental advocates and groups that are deeply committed to building these kinds of projects. And there are often reasonable disputes involving alternatives and opportunities for local mitigation. But the movement is organizationally and culturally built on an agenda of local resistance to building things. As a result, environmentalists have largely failed to articulate a compelling, progressive agenda for fighting climate change. While we see bits and pieces, such as local visions for infill development and reports on clean and local energy systems for select cities, as a whole, the movement lacks leadership and vision to make a case to the public about what needs to be done to dramatically reduce our carbon footprint.

Ironically, in this leadership void, members of the business community have now become some of the leading voices for fighting climate change. Infill real estate developers, clean

tech innovators and installers, and even car companies are now doing more to advance a low-carbon agenda than many environmentalists. In some cases, you're more likely to see climate change leadership from Silicon Valley venture capitalists than you are from some of our most respected environmental institutions.

Perhaps this outcome is not terrible. After all, the case for fighting climate change is about economic growth: doing more with fewer resources and developing and harnessing our local, sustainable resources.

But businesses will tend to push their narrow economic agenda. We still need environmental leaders who can make the case to the public and to decision-makers that there is a positive, over-arching vision for fighting climate change. We can provide citizens with better and more convenient housing options, we can end our dependence on large electric utilities and oil and gas companies and instead spend that money locally, we can clean our air and water and stop wasting finite resources, and we can feel positive about the prospects for preserving our standard of living for future generations.

But to make these arguments, the environmental movement may need to eat some sacred cows. Individuals may need to make sacrifices about the kind of projects that get built in their community, whether it's a wind turbine, a new bus or railway, or a multifamily housing unit. We may need to pay more upfront to modernize our electric grid and invest in new technologies. But at the end of the day, we - and the planet - will be better for it. It's time the environmental movement made that case.