

Mayor's Asia-Pacific Environmental Summit 2001
Opening Remarks by Mayor Jeremy Harris
May 4, 2001

Aloha and welcome to all distinguished participants in this, the second Mayor's Asia-Pacific Environmental Summit. We are honored by your presence.

Two years have passed since I welcomed you to the first Mayor's summit that took place in this very room. I wish I could tell you that since that time, we have finally turned the tide... that the environment is no longer threatened... that our air is cleaner... that our oceans are healthy again... and that our cities are less congested. I wish I could tell you that there is plenty of clean drinking water for everyone... and that most of our region's poor are enjoying a higher, sustainable standard of living. I wish I could tell you that we've turned back global warming... and that the ozone layer is now whole again. But I know... and you know... that none of that is true.

What is true is that while we have made some progress... and taken some important first steps, environmental conditions in our region... in our world... continue to worsen.

That's why over 400 of you have come here to Honolulu as delegates from all corners of the Asia-Pacific Basin... leaders from cities great and small... visionaries from business... economists and academics and some of the world's top environment experts.

We have come together here today, because we share an understanding that our destinies are interconnected. We recognize that we share a common future... a common fate, because we share a common environment.

A new century stands before us - a century of opportunity... opportunity to improve the quality of life of the 3.5 billion people that live in our Asia-Pacific region. But with that opportunity comes staggering challenges.

How do we expand our economies to improve the lives of our citizens without destroying our environment and the very health and welfare of our people? In the last century, the advances brought to us by the Industrial Revolution created economic growth and the quality of life that we now enjoy. But now we know that that prosperity was based on a false economy and fraudulent bookkeeping. The short-term economic advances of the last century, garnered from the rapid consumption and destruction of finite natural resources, failed to account for staggering long-term costs in the form of environmental degradation. Those bills are now coming due. It's time for an honest accounting of the true costs of our actions - costs sometimes measured in respiratory disease or the loss of biodiversity.

The short-term thinking of the last century has left our shared environment, ravaged by air and water pollution, our ocean ecosystem diminished by a loss of biodiversity... and our climate threatened by global warming.

The challenges we share are truly sobering. Today, 3.5 billion people live in the Asia-Pacific region; by 2025 that number will grow to 5 billion, a 40% increase. That means that resource consumption, infrastructure development, and service delivery will have to be increased by 40%, simply to maintain the status quo. A status quo, where three-fourth of the world's poor live in Asia and one in four children under 5 years of age is malnourished.

By the year 2030, it's estimated that 74 countries will double their population. The more our population increases, the more our problems escalate. When the population tripled in the last century, our consumption of energy and natural resources grew tenfold. Much of that consumption is based on the combustion of fossil fuels. We heat our homes, run our cars, cook our meals, and generate our

electricity with coal and oil. And, we fill our air with carbon emissions that cause respiratory disease... nitrogen and sulfur emissions that cause smog... and acid rain that destroys our forests.

Asian cities are decaying under the heaviest burden of all. Of the 15 most polluted cities on Earth, 13 are in Asia. In China's largest cities... smoke and dust from burning coal cause more than 50,000 premature deaths... and more than 400,000 new cases of bronchitis. And forty percent of the global mortality in young children caused by pneumonia occurs in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Indonesia.

With air pollution and elevated carbon dioxide levels also comes global warming, with its devastating effect on our weather. Shifts in average global temperatures that previously occurred over thousands of years could now happen within our children's lifetime, disrupting agricultural production and threatening world food supplies.

And as temperatures rise, the very existence of island and coastal communities is threatened by rising ocean levels.

Water resources are also severely polluted in many parts of our region. Over the last ten years, one third of the population of Asia had no access to safe drinking water, and at least half had no access to sanitation facilities.

The rivers in Asia now have fecal coliform counts that are 50 times higher than World Health Organization guidelines and concentrations of lead and other industrial pollutants that are at dangerous levels.

The Asian Development Bank has identified water pollution as the most serious threat to the environment of the region. Untreated sewage... toxic spills... chemicals used in agriculture... poisons leached from disposal sites... even direct

dumping of human and industrial waste into rivers and lakes... the level of degradation is staggering.

The cost of this pollution is tragically high. Over 500,000 infants die each year in the region as a result of contaminated drinking water and inadequate sanitation.

All of these challenges - air and water pollution, inadequate sanitation, contaminated drinking water - all are urban challenges that will grow as our urban population grows.

It's estimated that over half the world's population now live in cities. The ADB projects that by 2025, there will be 20 "mega-cities" in the Asia-Pacific region with populations of over 10 million people. This massive demographic shift from rural to urban society will dramatically change the nature and the scale of humanities' impact on our environment. It is up to us as urban leaders to work together to build a future that's not based on the mistakes of the past.

The model of the industrial 20th century, where cities and economies were built on the principle of subduing the environment and consuming its resources must be left behind. Our new model must be based on sustainability not consumption. With this new approach, the problems and challenges I've just discussed - though daunting - can be overcome.

To start, we can modify our economies so that they're sustainable. Those based on natural resources such as fisheries, forestry products, or tourism can achieve long-term economic stability by actually investing in environmental protection and regulating growth to stay within sustainable yields. Those of us with economies based on manufacturing or production can improve the quality of life in our communities and reduce long-term environmental and societal costs by redesigning our production processes to be more efficient and environmentally-friendly, and by including the cost of pollution control in our products.

Just as more sustainable production requires re-design down to the level of the smallest detail, we as the builders and managers of cities need to re-design our cities and their infrastructure, their neighborhoods and streets. Around the world we still depend on notions of urban planning from 19th century Europe or on water and sewage infrastructure design from Roman times.

As local leaders, we can improve the quality of life in our cities and reduce air pollution by instituting proper land use planning and zoning measures. By eliminating urban sprawl, we can reduce our reliance on automobiles and the high pollution and infrastructure costs that accompany them. More compact, pedestrian friendly design can allow us to re-introduce traditional forms of getting around, such as bicycles.

We can develop pollution free forms of transportation for our cities - such as electric vehicles fuel cell technology or Hydrogen power. One of the problems that has stood in our way is the high cost of research and development and the small market for such vehicles that a single city represents. As a result, the price of these vehicles is high. We should discuss forming urban consortiums that pool our purchase orders so that the economies of scale make the cost of alternative fueled vehicles affordable to our cities.

As Mayors, we can develop responsible energy policies... policies that eliminate our dependence on fossil fuels and develop clean, renewable energy systems to power our cities. By doing this, we can once again have clean air and eliminate the staggering costs of smog, acid rain, and respiratory disease.

We can clean our rivers and streams as well... by investing in recycling systems for our cities. We can't afford to waste resources - whether it's water, metal or glass.

We can treat our wastewater and use it again for industrial production or agricultural irrigation. We can turn our waste glass into glass-phalt to build our roads and our scrap metals into re-bar to build our cities.

Over the next three days, we'll be exploring these and other issues. We'll see how poor environmental quality has become a leading cause of poverty and how that poverty creates further environmental degradation. We'll discuss new approaches to providing improved water supplies and infrastructure in poor communities; and look at practical ways that cities can save money and reduce air pollution by improving their energy efficiency.

We'll see how cities can build sustainable tourism economies that don't degrade their natural resources or their cultural heritage. And, we'll look at ways to control urban sprawl and to revitalize and green our inner cities.

The problems we'll discuss are all shared problems - common to cities large and small. Working together, sharing information and ideas, we can solve these problems.

We are all here because we recognize that we have a shared destiny... that environmental pollution knows no political jurisdiction or national boundary. The problems we face are global and they are urban. We are all affected. But, in this new century, we now recognize that good environmental policy is good economic policy.

It's up to us... working together... to rebuild our cities with this new understanding. To rebuild our cities to be sustainable cities - livable cities - developed on the same principles as natural ecological systems. In doing so, we can have strong economies without destroying our environment. We can provide jobs for our people and a high quality of life in our communities without leaving our children the legacy of a depleted and despoiled world.

Few of us would have conceived that we'd be confronted with so many complex and enormous problems - problems with truly global consequences. Nor did we realize that we, as Mayors, would be granted this opportunity to make a difference, not only to our local communities, but to our world. In our urbanizing world, the future will be guided by the trends of its cities.

Today, at this Summit, setting our cities on a sustainable course is not only our challenge, it's also an exciting opportunity.

We can leave our children a sustainable world and a new environmental ethic.

We can reverse the course of environmental destruction that has been set in motion. We can. And we must. It's our responsibility.

Mahalo... and thank you for being part of this important summit.