

Silver Bullitt
by Sara Stroud - 11.2.09

From spearheading the first Earth Day to directing the [National Renewable Energy Laboratory](#) under President Jimmy Carter, Denis Hayes has been at the forefront of the environmental movement



for four decades. Since the early 1990s, Hayes has been zeroing in on the Pacific Northwest as president and CEO of the Seattle-based [Bullitt Foundation](#), with a mission to promote environmental sustainability in the region.

With about \$90 million in assets, the foundation in late 2008 announced it was narrowing its funding focus to the areas of ecosystem services, energy and technology, civic engagement and urban ecology. The foundation is also working on a plan for its new headquarters—a five-story building in Seattle’s Capitol Hill neighborhood aiming to meet the ambitious standards of the Living Building Challenge.

Sustainable Industries caught up with Hayes this fall to discuss ways in which the Bullitt Foundation is working to stay on the cutting-edge of sustainable development, his take on building standards and why enacting climate change legislation is more challenging than the environmental policies of the 70s.

SI: The Bullitt Foundation’s criteria refer to “high risk, high potential payoff opportunities to exert unusual leverage.” What are some projects that exemplify those criteria?

DH: There’s a group called Central City Concern down in Portland [that was initially set up to deal with alcoholism and homelessness and now also develops and manages low-income housing]. . . . They wanted to capture the rain that fell on the roof ... but it was against the law in Oregon. ... They wanted to explore what it would take, what sort of [tweak in the law](#), it would take to do that.

We gave them a small grant to do that. They began investigating and a local architecture firm loaned an

architect. [Central City Concern] proposed legislation in the Oregon state legislature to put [a rainwater collection law] into effect as a new statute. So as a consequence of a relatively small grant—I think it was like \$10,000—we fundamentally changed water law in the state of Oregon.

SI: In what ways might the Bullitt Foundation’s influence extend beyond the Pacific Northwest?

DH: Most of what we do is to experiment, to try out things, and if they’re successful then we’ll try to call other people’s attention to them. If we do something fairly exciting here it gets picked up. ... So we’re looking for models of sustainable development, and to the extent that we come up with things that really seem to be working—such as the really fairly extraordinary investments Portland has been making in transportation systems and the stuff Seattle has been doing creating modes of urban villages—it becomes [a model]. ... We have a chance to have an impact, both on our successes and our failures.

... It’s one of the reasons we’re putting a huge amount of effort right now into trying to create an extraordinarily green building, so that if we can create that model, we hope to get it replicated by a great many people throughout the Northwest. Then it becomes a model for others elsewhere; it becomes commonplace.



SI: Looking at green building standards and building performance standards, do you think we need to go beyond existing certifications? If so, how far must we go and how do we get there?

DH: I think you need to go further and in a different direction than most of the standards out there. But that’s in no way to diminish the impact, for example, LEED has had. From a very small base, [the U.S. Green Building Council] has transformed the nature of modern urban architecture. ... But it’s possible to have a LEED-Silver building that ... operates better than a LEED-Platinum building. That kind of craftsmanship is really hard to get with a prescriptive standard—you only get that with a performance standard.

I was fighting as early as the mid-1970s to have national building energy performance standards. I think we ought to have them, and unlike the [CAFE](#) (Corporate Average Fuel Economy) standards with automobiles ... we should

tighten them every two or three years as technology improves.

SI: The foundation's mission mentions the importance of "engaging urban dwellers." What are some strategies it employs to do so?

DH: In the area we operate in, it's pretty difficult not to. The citizens of Seattle are deeply involved in community planning. What we're trying to do though ... is to get them to actually think in broad terms ... about the future of the city, and writ large, the future of the planet. ... And we're trying with each of these individual projects we get involved with in any given community to tie it into a much broader framework. I don't know how successful all of that will be, but our aspiration is not just to put up a building or revitalize a neighborhood, but to create a series of truly great models of sustainable development. We should be able to do most of those things here. We should be able to do most of those things everywhere, but this should be about the easiest place in the world to exert leadership.

SI: The magnitude of changes you suggest seem like they would require a cultural shift. How do you get businesses on board with making that kind of transition toward a more sustainable economy?

DH: Business leaders are often a bit defensive about things that affect their own industry and, in particular, their own company, and are often really quite enlightened about things that affect other industries and other companies. And so what we tend to do is to try to build our allies in the business community initially among those for whom it's either something that will be profitable for them or something to which they are indifferent in economic terms, but they think makes a great deal of sense environmentally and socially.

Ultimately, I think what has to happen is there needs to be changes in the price regime. The world is a closed environment and the economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of that, and what economists refer to as externalities are external to the economic system but not to the environment. There are no externalities: They're all real costs. Somebody has to pay them and [the Bullitt Foundation's] philosophy is that they should be paid by whoever is getting the benefit from it. If you can get the prices right, a whole lot of stuff just solves itself. If you get the prices wrong, all the efforts you make through regulations and exhortation are [second-order effects](#).

SI: In addition to being the coordinator of the first Earth Day, you also pushed for landmark legislative changes in the 1970s. How would you compare that period with now, and the current struggle with climate change?

DH: Obviously things were very different in the 1970s.

Dealing with some of the things we managed to get passed during that golden era, the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act ... among the assets we had were that things were pretty visible. ... Today, the big threats facing us are, for the most part, global in nature and it's hard to get America to do something unless everybody else does it, but it's very hard to get every country to jump into the pool at exactly the same moment. ... We were dealing back then with stuff that was an immediate and obvious threat. We had it relatively easy. [In the case of the Clean Air Act] an outraged public demanded it. We don't have that today. Carbon dioxide has not managed to stir up that same kind of public passion. We haven't managed to stir that kind of level of informed, articulate public passion around the issue. Until we do I'm afraid we're only going to be taking itty-bitty steps.

SI: How do you think the stimulus package is working to spur investment in clean energy, green building and other sustainability-focused sectors?

DH: I think it's doing a lot of good. The difficulty is when you're trying to get money out fast, the emphasis is on shovel-ready projects that are mostly not at the cutting edge of new technologies.

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