



MOTHER EARTH NEWS

Local Self-Reliance: Green Parking Lots, Neighborhood Governments, Balancing Inequities and More

March/April 1982

<http://www.motherearthnews.com/nature-community/self-reliance-zmaz82mazglo.aspx>

By the Mother Earth News Editors



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For the past several years, the good folks at the Institute for Local Self-Reliance (ILSR) in Washington, D.C. have been working to help urban residents gain greater control over their lives through the use of low-technology, de-centralist tools and concepts. We strongly believe that more people (city dwellers and country folk) should be exposed to the institute's admirable efforts.

It's amazing how much valuable information on local self-reliance exists but fails to reach the people who could best use it. For one reason or another, a book or report may receive so little publicity that even ILSR staffers have a hard time tracking it down! Here, however, are some new and interesting publications that we did manage to locate. One or more of them just might intrigue you, too.

Improving Urban Environments

Not many people know about it, but a group called The Climate Project — which works out of Dayton, Ohio — has been making cities more livable for several years now. The Climate Project recently published an unusually detailed report on its "grass parking lot" experiment. The 30,000-square-foot area, which is big enough to accommodate some 80 cars, is paved with lattice concrete therefore allowing grass to grow in the spaces between the paving strips. The checkerboard lawn, in turn, helps keep the surrounding area cool, reduces costly water runoff and improves the appearance of the lot.

In its report, The Climate Project covers the zoning regulations and required permits, site description and design, specifications, the choice of plant materials available to anyone wanting to duplicate these efforts, costs, and the organization's efforts to evaluate the undertaking.

Establishing Neighborhood Governments

Neighborhood government was quite a popular subject of discussion 10 or so years ago, but you don't hear much about it now. In fact, no city or town in America has what can properly be called a functioning neighborhood government — that is, one which has the power to tax or to legislate.

There are, however, scores of community councils that have gained the official recognition of local governments and that advise administrators on neighborhood issues. We also tracked down a detailed plan for neighborhood government proposed by a municipal judge in Cleveland. In *Cities Within a City*, Burt W. Griffin describes a two-tier system under which Cleveland City Hall would be responsible for collecting taxes, doing the accounting and central purchasing, and distributing funds to "sub-cities." The latter organizations would run such municipal services as street repair, snow removal, local park and real property improvements, refuse collection, fire control and law enforcement. Griffin has an intriguing idea, although he does raise as many questions as he answers.

Nixing a Mall, Supporting the Community

One often hears about fancy shopping malls, built on the outskirts of town, that cause the downtown and neighborhood shopping districts to suffer. But in Lawrence, Kan., a public opinion survey recently showed that there was overwhelming opposition to a proposed mall, and strong support for a new department store. The city rejected plans for the shopping center, and chose to undertake downtown commercial renovation instead.

"Mall has become a four-letter word here," said Dean Palos of the Lawrence-Douglas County Planning Commission.

Those interested in downtown commercial development should also read *Analyzing Neighborhood Retail Opportunities: A Guide for Carrying Out a Preliminary Market Study*, which is a report put out by the [American Planning Association](#). It contains solid advice for neighborhood groups and business associations and gives special attention to the problems of low-income community shopping areas. The publication is proof that introductory information doesn't have to be general or superficial.

Balancing Inequities in Appalachia

One of the most dismaying reports we've encountered in a long time is *The Land Survey*, a study of Appalachian land ownership patterns, which shows that this beautiful area is — in effect — an impoverished colony controlled by a few wealthy outsiders. The problem of absentee ownership in Appalachia isn't a new one, but the extent of it — which has only recently been brought to light — has shocked even dyed-in-the-wool local-control advocates. The study has had unusual impact in its own backyard, too, because it was funded by the otherwise conservative [Appalachian Regional Commission Research](#) was done by citizens and scholars in the area — not by a panel of outside "experts."

According to the study, 75 percent of the mineral-rich land surveyed is absentee-owned. Worse still, the "outsiders" pay a disproportionately low share of taxes. In Virginia, for example, a typical absentee corporation pays taxes of 42¢ per acre, while local owners fork over an average of \$1.02 per acre! To put it another way, ten landowners in Martin County control acreage valued at \$9.4 million, but paid a grand total of \$92 in taxes in 1978! Meanwhile, the county has no hospital or sewage facilities, and its two fire departments are staffed totally by volunteers.

The same scenario is repeated elsewhere, too. In Walker County, Ala., 28 landowners, controlling 65 percent of the county's mineral wealth, paid a total of \$8,807 in property taxes . . . while the county educational system has had to borrow money to open schools each fall for the past 16 years!

Building Energy-Efficient Housing

On a more optimistic note, we've encountered tutorials that offer plenty of useful information for builders of energy-efficient homes.

Community organizations should take a look at the [Solar Barnraising Manual](#), which was written by folks who have put together many neighborhood gatherings for the purpose of building greenhouses, solar panels and sun rooms. The manual includes checklists of the various tasks to be done for each job, sample forms and handouts, and tips on finding funds and participants.